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Officials Voice Traffic Safety Concerns From Casella Landfill

Robert Blechl
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Tom Banit, of Whitefield, protests in Bethlehem in August 2020 against Casella Waste Systems' proposed Stage VI landfill expansion, which was given a conditional approval on Friday by the state. (File photo by Robert Blechl)

A North Country environmental group, Whitefield town officials, and state transportation officials have expressed concerns about risks to traffic safety associated with the proposed Casella Waste Systems in nearby Dalton.

Members of the North Country Alliance for Balanced Change said while the town of Littleton would face no landfill truck traffic through its town, Whitefield would bear the burden of 100 trucks a day (equating to 200 round trip) going along the original proposed path of northbound Route 3 to Route 116 in Whitefield to the privately owned 137-acre commercial landfill that would be accessed off of Route 116 in Bethlehem, near the Littleton town line.

During Nov. 30 Whitefield Board of Selectmen's meeting, Tom Tower, a member of ABC, one of several local citizens groups opposed to a landfill in Dalton and whose members seeks to balance economic development with the environment, brought up the issue of traffic flow, according to the draft minutes of the meeting.

ABC feels the issue is a regional one and asks communities to work together, said Tower.

Under the plan, landfill truck traffic would continue along Route 3 through Twin Mountain to Whitefield, where arriving trucks would turn left onto Route 116, he said.

"Twin Mountain and Whitefield are heavily impacted," said Tower. "This is a pretty significant risk to safety, i.e., pedestrian safety and a negative impact on the area."

The truck volume would also carry impacts on existing infrastructure, he said.

ABC member Sara Doucette, of Whitefield, said the truck route has not been in dispute since the beginning.

"Whitefield is the favored route," she said. "Casella made it clear that he has no interest in looking at Littleton or aggravating Littleton. Whitefield is the epicenter of this terrific traffic burden."

On Nov. 17, ABC wrote a letter to the New Hampshire Department of Transportation about a regional impact on communities and requested access to documents and an opportunity to address it as a regional issue, she said.

The group is reviewing a packet with Casella's traffic study, which has the focus on Whitefield, and is also enlisting its own traffic engineer, and would like to make that information from the engineer available to Whitefield, whose town public works and emergency services might want to see it, said Doucette.

Whitefield Selectmen Peter Corey said the town met with DOTs' District 1, based in Lancaster, and DOT's Traffic Bureau, from Concord, a year ago to discuss the Routes 3 and 116 intersections by Jiffy Mart, Lufkin's Garage, and the Triangle Dairy Bar, and the route beginning at 116 to Whitefield's Weeks Medical Center office and the Summit by Morrison.

There have been existing concerns about traffic and pedestrian safety that now increase from Casella's potential landfill, which would involve 90 trucks a day, he said.

The town wants to create a safer intersection and sidewalks up the hill, said Corey.

DOT is keenly concerned, and the North Country Council is concerned, he said.

DOT is actively working on traffic studies, said Selectman Shawn White, who is awaiting those studies and said he is not for the project.

The Route 3 and Route 116 intersection is the most dangerous in town, said Whitefield Board of Selectmen Chairman Stan Holz.

The long-term discussion has involved adding sidewalks, slowing traffic speeds, and getting access to and from the medical center and summit, and the intersection is in the state's 10-year traffic plan, he said.

ABC member Eliot Wessler voiced concerns about trash from high winds and from possible truck rollovers flowing into John's River at the intersection and said the peak times for landfill truck traffic are also when children are going to and from school.

"It's very obvious Casella will do anything to avoid political entanglements with Littleton," said Wessler. "People think this is unfair. Littleton has political muscle and is a wealthy town. Casella has exempted Littleton from any traffic impacts."

He encouraged towns to get together and view the traffic issue as a regional one and ensure that DOT knows how strongly Whitefield feels about the project.

Holz said the three selectmen feel that the project only has a significant impact on the town of Whitefield with no upside.

"There is no support from the town for this project as it does not help the town at all," said Holz.

According to the Jan. 29, 2020 meeting minutes between the DOT and Casella representatives, Casella engineer John Gay confirmed that Casella wants to avoid conflicts with residents and businesses in downtown Littleton that would be caused by trucks.

The company would be open to alternative routes, he said to DOT representatives.

In District 1, Alex Thompson said DOT has concerns about increased truck traffic in light of what he said are frequent accidents on Route 116 between Whitefield and Littleton, including recent fatal crashes.

Paul Regis, of District 1, said other routes include northbound Interstate 93 to Exit 42 to keep trucks on the interstate as long as possible.

Exit 41, he said, causes concern because of the turn at the Littleton Opera House.

There is also concern about the hill on Route 116 in Whitefield leaving Route 3, said Regis.

Gay confirmed to DOT at the Jan. 29 meeting that the estimated truck traffic is expected to be 100 67-foot trucks per day, excluding local contractor traffic and smaller vehicles and passenger vehicles and also excluding truck operations at Chick's Sand and Gravel, which would be next to the landfill.

Thompson asked if any foreseen increase of incoming trash from the east or west would make the proposed trucking route insufficient.

Gay said there might be in the future.

Regis also said DOT has concerns about the necessity of a staging area for trucks, as a current problem at Casella's Bethlehem landfill is that trucks arrive before the gate is opened and park along Trudeau Road and on pull-offs along Route 3.