

COURIER

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State-of-the-art landfill a mystery to many

(Fourth in a series)

By Mike Dickerman

BETHLEHEM—There are no armed sentries at the entrance to the Consumat Sanco landfill. Guard dogs don't patrol the grounds in search of trespassers. Intruders aren't shot on shot.

As exaggerated as the above may sound, it is not beyond belief that many area residents view the controversial Bethlehem landfill as being an entity closer to a military installation than a solid waste disposal facility.

For years, operators of the Trudeau Road landfill say they

have lived with the fact that people look with great suspicion on their operation. Perhaps now, they say, it is time to debunk all the misconceptions.

"I don't think there's any question that over the years we've been remiss in not entering into a more aggressive public relations program about our facility," said Consumat Sanco president Ron Cook in a recent interview with The Courier.

"The public really doesn't understand what goes on at the landfill. I think if they did, they'd feel differently about what we're doing."

The fact that the landfill is, for the most part, out of sight of the normal Trudeau Road motorist (and even those Bethlehem residents who regularly leave their trash at Sanco's transfer station) has done little to alleviate the facility's aura of secrecy.

"What we're running here isn't just a dump. It's a facility... where a lot of science is involved," said Leo Larochelle, Consumat Sanco's director of technical services.

Besides being the final resting place for more than 100,000 tons of waste annually, the landfill grounds are the site of more than a

dozen groundwater monitoring wells (testing four times a year), an intricate leachate collection system, and an engineered drainage system.

As a result, said Larochelle, the state-of-the-art facility is one of the top, if not the finest run landfills in the northeast.

Despite the perceived veil of secrecy over the landfill, Sanco officials insist they have nothing to hide—not from the public, nor from the state.

"Anyone that has come to us and asked for a tour of our facility, I have welcomed," said Larochelle. "We have nothing to hide. We

wish people would take the time to see what we are doing," added Cook.

Due to safety concerns, Larochelle said visitors aren't allowed to roam the Sanco property freely. Instead they are accompanied by Sanco personnel (usually Larochelle). "Our tours really open people's eyes as to what goes on here. Their perceptions change once they've been here."

No small operation

Consumat Sanco's actual landfill operation uses up just a small portion of the approximately 125

acres of land the company owns. Sanco claims it is permitted to utilize about 26 acres of its land—a figure disputed by the local citizens group AWARE—and present operating plans call for complete use of the permitted acreage.

When landfiling started at the site back in 1976, a 400' by 400' unlined parcel was used by owner Harold Brown. Ten years later a 1.3-acre single-lined parcel was put into use after Sanco (Brown's successor) gained state approval to use the small plot on an interim basis.

(Continued on Eight)

Sanco

(Continued from One)

It was in that same year that Sanco, after much debate and controversy, was also granted a special exception by the Bethlehem Zoning Board of Adjustment to undertake a major expansion of its facility.

The size of that expansion, which remains at is issue today, allowed the landfill to expand by 19 acres. Today, just a little over five years after the expansion area began accepting solid waste, nearly three quarters of those 19 acres have been filled with waste. In another two to three years, it will all be filled.

Sanco's state approved (but not locally approved) operating plan for the next seven or eight years calls for the relining and reusing of the original unlined landfill acreage and the single lined 1.3 acre interim area.

At present, Sanco is aggressively removing the buried solid waste from these two areas and depositing it in one of the expansion area's four double-lined cells. The transfer operation is expected to be completed by spring, at which time Sanco will begin site work to prepare the two older landfill areas for double-lining and eventual acceptance of trash (probably in 1995 or 1996).

These older sections of the landfill have long been identified as problem areas within and outside of the landfill's boundaries. The infamous seep into the nearby Ammonoosuc River (on the abutting Tucker property) is believed to be a direct result of trash buried in the unlined area of the landfill.



READY TO BE FILLED--The fourth and final double-lined cell of the Consumat Sanco landfill expansion area sits ready to accept refuse by year's end. In the background is the No. 3 cell of the expansion area, where trash is currently being deposited.

(Photo by Mike Dickerman)

Although conclusive tests have never been done to confirm Sanco's suspicions, company officials believe that as much as half of their 125 acres could be suitable for landfilling in the future. Whether Sanco will ever be allowed to expand again is questionable, however, since town zoning regulations prohibit any new or expanded landfill operations in Bethlehem, unless they are run by the municipality.

Tons of trash

With the number of landfills in the state dwindling--there being just two commercial landfills currently in operation--Consumat Sanco has had no problem finding customers for its facility.

According to a report submitted to town officials last April by Sanco, the landfill buried 103,916 tons of solid waste in 1991. In 1990, 77,851 tons were buried at the landfill.

As longtime landfill opponent Dan Tucker pointed out at a Dec. 29 Zoning board of Adjustment hearing, "This has not turned out to be the 90-ton a day operation that was sold to the Town of Bethlehem seven years ago...it's a much bigger operation."

Sanco's 1991 customer list reads like a list of northern New Hampshire municipalities. Some 34 communities, most north of the Lakes Region, accounted for one quarter (or 26,318 tons) of Sanco's 1991 trash intake. In all, Sanco accepted close to 76,000 tons of New Hampshire trash in 1991.

Out-of-state customers, including Bath Iron Works of Maine, Green Mountain Rubbish of Vermont, and a half dozen other small Maine communities accounted for an additional 15,878 tons of waste. Total out-of-state waste was 27,993 tons in 1991.

While a majority of the waste accepted at the landfill is traditional municipal solid waste, the landfill also accepts construction and demolition debris, tires, waste oil, scrap metals, old car batteries, and ash. Items such as the batteries, tires and metals are not disposed of on-site, but are shipped elsewhere. The waste oil is used to heat the landfill's maintenance building.

Leachate collected at the site is also shipped out of town (to Massachusetts) for deposit in wastewater treatment facilities. Sanco is allowed to dispose of the leachate in any one of five approved locales. In 1992, more than 250,000 gallons of leachate were collected at the landfill and deposited elsewhere.

Perhaps no category of waste draws more concern from the public than that identified by the state as "special waste". According to Larochelle, all special waste products taken in by Sanco are "non-hazardous" products, yet are sensitive enough environmentally that Sanco cannot accept them without the consent of the state.

Both Sanco and the state conduct tests on the materials prior to Sanco accepting it for disposal. All testing is done at state-certified laboratories, said Larochelle.

Often Sanco will also send personnel to the site where the special waste is to come from. "We're the ones that have to live with these materials. Obviously, we

want to know exactly what we're dealing with," said Larochelle.

Bob Brannen, Sanco's site supervisor, said continuing rumors that the landfill is and has been surreptitiously accepting hazardous materials "are ridiculous."

"It's someone's pipe dream," said Brannen.

"With the invested liability we have in this landfill, what goes into it is certainly more a concern to us than anyone else," added Cook. "We have the most to lose. We have the most at stake."

Sanco's acceptance of special waste came under particularly close scrutiny last year when it was learned that the landfill was accepting contaminated soil from the Foster Grant Factory in Leominster, MA, a plant linked through television reports to high incidences of autistic children borne to its factory workers.

During a six-week period, the Foster Grant soil was used to cover trash hauled in to the landfill during the day.

Cook said AWARE's reaction to Sanco accepting the Foster Grant material "was self-serving... hysterical."

"Everyone, meaning Sanco and the state, did their job," said Cook. "Everything was well regulated."

Despite Sanco officials' assurances, to this day unsubstantiated reports on mysterious "nighttime activities" at the landfill persist. Just two weeks ago, in fact, an anonymous caller contacted this reporter to say he knew of illegal dumpings occurring at the landfill. Thus far, no evidence substantiating this charge has been uncovered.

Offering some benefits

Over the years, some Bethlehem residents opposed to the siting of the landfill in their community have dubbed the town the "Waste Capital of New Hampshire". Certainly the Sanco landfill, with its 90-foot high mountains of covered trash, is the largest of its kind in the northern part of the state. Yet Sanco officials like to point out that the landfill does provide local residents with some benefits.

For example, Sanco operates at no cost to the town a staffed transfer station in which residents can dump their refuse in collection bins. At the same site, Sanco operates a recycling center in which aluminum items, newspaper and glass are collected and transported to Consumat Sanco's recycling plant in Milford.

Conditions of the 1986 special exception granted to Sanco by Bethlehem's ZBA also require that the town get a discounted rate for trash disposal at the landfill, and that Sanco give Bethlehem a 50 cent credit for every ton of out-of-town trash accepted at the landfill.

In 1991, for example, total tonnage credits realized by the town amounted to \$83,561 according to Sanco records. That represented a \$61.99 per ton savings, or \$152 per taxable Bethlehem household for the year 1991.

Balanced against the town's total disposal costs for the year (\$72,979), the town wound up in the black to the tune of \$10,763.98.

Finally, Larochelle said Sanco prides itself on the appearance of its landfill, which is admittedly relatively free of wind-strewn trash. Because of the microscope that the landfill is under and has been under for so long, Sanco has taken its clean-up efforts a step further by voluntarily each day conducting roadside trash pick-up along Trudeau Road.

"When people see trash alongside the road, they automatically assume it has come from the landfill, when 99 percent of the time that's not the case," said Larochelle. "Picking up the (roadside) trash is just one way we can make the area look more presentable and acceptable to those who are so quick to criticize this facility all the time."