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Locals React To Landfill Moratorium In Governor's Budget

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In her proposed 2-year budget, Gov. Kelly Ayotte, seen here on Thursday with Speaker of the House Sherman Packard, center, and New Hampshire Senate president Sharon Carson, is proposing a moratorium on the permitting of new landfills as well as a revamped regulatory process, both of which drew support from some local residents.

Some residents were heartened on Thursday after Gov. Kelly Ayotte — who, during her inaugural address in January, voiced opposition to the proposed commercial landfill in Dalton — called for a moratorium on permitting new landfills in her proposed 2-year budget.

In her statehouse address to the New Hampshire Senate and House of Representatives, Ayotte said the state needs to continue its funding to attract a talented workforce, promote tourism, and “spread the gospel of the New Hampshire way.”

“And since we’re on the subject of what draws others here, our natural beauty as a state is both one of our points of pride, but it’s more than that,” she said. “It is the bedrock of our unique quality of life here in New Hampshire. To me, it’s pretty much common sense to say that our North Country, our Lakes Region, our beautiful open spaces, shouldn’t be scarred by poorly envisioned projects that detract from our quality of life. Which is why I’m announcing today a landfill moratorium and a revamped regulatory process for approving these projects coming forward, to ensure that our beauty as a state is not compromised.”

Her words drew loud applause.

Afterward, residents and legislators weighed in.

State Sen. Dave Rochefort, R-Littleton, who opposes the proposed landfill, said Ayotte’s staff called him Wednesday night to say her remarks on the moratorium would soon be coming, but until the words came out, it would have to be embargoed.

“I had a hard time sleeping last night,” he said. “I was like a kid on Christmas Eve.”

Rochefort said it’s his understanding that Ayotte’s budget proposal will come in the form of House Bill 2, which could be publicly released in the next few days.

The House will develop its own budget, which could differ from the governor’s.

After April, when the House is expected to pass its budget, the House and Senate will see where their priorities line up and work out the finer details, he said.

“After today, the House at least has an understanding of where she stands on certain issues and her priorities,” said Rochefort. “This is so exciting.”

In August 2023, before the 2024 governor's race kicked off, Ayotte visited the North Country, where she was presented with the landfill issue and was approached by residents on the street who opposed it and said it needs to be addressed, he said.

"I think it shows you she is a person of her word, and this speaks well of her," said Rochefort. "When you look at other things she's proposed, you see she really holds the North Country in high regard. I can't remember a governor who cared this much about the North Country. For her to go out of her way shows you she has a genuine appreciation of the place we call home. I promised that I would fight this issue. That the governor and I see eye to eye is refreshing."

In a statement, resident members of the North Country Alliance for Balanced Change said, "We applaud Gov. Ayotte's continued leadership in defending the North Country and ensuring that the next landfill is responsibly sited and takes into account the immense community impact new landfill development brings. We look forward to working with the governor and legislature to put in place a common-sense moratorium on new landfill development, a new Site Evaluation Committee for future locations, and other important legislative priorities."

"Finally, a governor who sees that 'poorly envisioned' is a charitable way to describe an unneeded 'Bay State Magnet' in perhaps the worst tract for trash in the state," said Adam Finkel, of Dalton. "DES [New Hampshire Department of Environmental Services] has just enacted the weakest siting rules on the planet; glad these will be 'revamped.'"

To date, Casella Waste Systems, which is proposing the landfill, has not commented on the governor's opposition, and on Jan. 17, a week after her inaugural address declined to respond to questions from The Caledonian-Record asking if the company has reached out to Ayotte, or intends to reach out, and if the company plans to try to overcome her opposition.

During Casella's fourth quarter 2024 earnings call on Thursday morning, company principals did not bring up the proposed landfill in Dalton and were not asked questions about it by equity analysts.

Casella has deadlines of Feb. 28 and March 24 to respond to NHDES requests for more information. NHDES said the company needs to provide more information in its permit applications before an adequate review by the state can occur.

Residents and local lawmakers critical of the project in Dalton said the facility being proposed is in a poor site that has much sand and gravel, little hard ground, and fast-moving groundwater beneath it, which they said would create risk if a leak were to occur and leave little time for remediation before contaminants reach nearby surface waters.

Some also noted comments made on Jan. 23 by Jeremy Labbe, general manager of Casella's landfill in Coventry, Vt., on a Vermont Public Radio podcast about why Vermont has one landfill and New Hampshire six.

According to the interview, Labbe, speaking about the Coventry site, said, "Geologically, this is a good site. The soil here has very dense glacial till. You know, you can't put this stuff on really soft clay, you don't want to put this stuff on sand, really, really loose sand or—"

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