

North Country residents rally against Dalton landfill: 'I don't want Massachusetts trash'

BY: CLAIRE SULLIVAN - JUNE 28, 2024 5:00 AM



Dozens of residents from Dalton and surrounding towns rallied against a proposed landfill ahead of a meeting with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers on Wednesday, June 26, 2024. (Claire Sullivan | New Hampshire Bulletin)

Andrea Bryant lives in Bethlehem, about a mile from the landfill there. She doesn't open her windows at night anymore because she's often been woken up by a thick stench in her house, though the noise still rouses her most mornings.

The same company that operates that landfill, Vermont-based Casella Waste Systems, is trying to build another dump in the nearby community of Dalton, just half a mile from Forest Lake and close to the Ammonoosuc River.

"I think of poor Forest Lake," she said at a public meeting Wednesday evening hosted by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which has powers to approve or deny the landfill proposal. "Sound travels over lakes."

She warned, too, that Casella might eventually try to expand the landfill in Dalton, as it had recently won the right to in Bethlehem, despite its permit application saying the facility would have an 18-year lifespan.

"They're not going to stop at this," she said. "They haven't for us."

She was one of several dozen locals – hailing from Dalton, Whitefield, Bethlehem, and other North Country communities, as well as a few from the southern portion of the state – to voice disapproval of the project. They were joined by elected officials, including those vying for Senate seats and one for the corner office, who said they would change the political momentum on solid waste issues in the state.

Before people piled into the Dalton Municipal Building, a converted meeting room fit with high ceilings and a basketball hoop, they rallied outside, waving protest signs in front of the winding, forested road that stretches through the rural town of about 900.

They fear the 70-acre landfill would scar Dalton and surrounding towns. That the dump trucks would overwhelm their rural roads. That the smell, the noise, and the pollution would corrupt the pristine environment. And that the peaceful, natural beauty would be jeopardized to house large amounts of trash from out of state and southern New Hampshire.

It was Timothy Ricker's first protest. A Whitefield resident and Navy veteran, he's lived in the area almost all his life, preferring the trees to the cities' crowds. He doesn't want his home "polluted by greed" and is sure there's a better place to put the landfill.

Dalton is in Coös County, the least populated and poorest region of the state. Residents worry the landfill would plummet the value of their homes – often passed on from generation to generation – and ward away the tourists that boost the local economy.

The corps is accepting public comment on the landfill until July 3, though officials indicated they would continue engagement with affected communities beyond that date. The timeline for deciding on a permit varies "widely" by project, ranging from months to years, said Tammy Turley, the chief of the regulatory division for the New England district of the corps.

The corps has authority over the waters of the United States, giving it decision-making power over the landfill because of the effect it would have on wetlands.

Developing the site would result in half an acre of temporary wetland impact and around 11.5 acres of permanent wetland impact, according to a letter in the permit application from John Gay, an engineer with Casella.



Residents voiced concerns to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers during a public meeting in the Dalton Municipal Building on Wednesday, June 26, 2024. (Claire Sullivan | New Hampshire Bulletin)

In his letter, Gay said the site was chosen based on a “multi-state siting analysis.” In a presentation on Wednesday, he said the roads and highway access played a part in attracting the company to this site. Part of the project would involve expanding an access road, according to the permit.

Casella has offered free trash and recycling pickup for Dalton residents, non-industrial small businesses, and town-owned buildings, Gay said, though this has not been finalized or negotiated. Residents said this offer did little to mitigate their concerns and would do nothing for those in neighboring towns who would still feel the impact of the project.

One of those residents is David Lynch, who said he moved his family to Whitefield a little over a year ago because it seemed like a “very clean, wholesome place” to raise his daughter. He worries the landfill could pollute Forest Lake, where his family and many others swim.

He said the surrounding towns are often forgotten in conversations on the landfill, despite their shared stake in the local environment and watershed.

“I don't understand why Casella gets to build this horrible waste center that could really harm our community in Whitefield as badly as Dalton,” Lynch said, “yet they only talk to Dalton and only offer little benefits to Dalton.”

Wayne Morrison, a Whitefield resident and president of the North Country Alliance for Balanced Change, said it “could not be further from the truth” that the site was selected for the roadways, which he said are “ill-suited” for a daily barrage of trucks.

He also noted some of those trucks would be carrying trash from 150 miles south in Massachusetts, creating a “ridiculous carbon footprint.”

“If that's serving the people of Dalton, I don't want free trash pickup,” he said. “And I don't want Massachusetts trash.”

An effort to curb out-of-state trash died in the Senate this year, along with another proposal that would have put a pause on new landfills in the state. The upper chamber has long halted action on solid waste issues.

Senate candidates Rusty Talbot, a Sugar Hill Democrat running in District 1, and Rep. Rebecca McWilliams, a Concord Democrat running in District 15, appeared at the rally vowing to change that. Rep. David Rochefort, a Littleton Republican who is also running for Senate in District 1 and has carried landfill bills in the House, sent a representative in support of the rally.

Rep. Kelley Potenza, a Rochester Republican, said the issue blurred party lines.

“Yes, I’m a Republican,” she said, following the two Democratic candidates in speaking. “... This isn’t a partisan issue, this is a health issue.”



Cinde Warmington, an executive councilor and Democratic candidate for governor, said she would support a pause on landfill development in the state. (Claire Sullivan | New Hampshire Bulletin)

All four major candidates for governor told WMUR they opposed the Dalton landfill. Executive Councilor Cinde Warmington, a Democrat vying for the office, was the only one to appear at the rally, where she said she would support a moratorium on new landfill development.

“Other states need to take responsibility for their own refuse,” Warmington said, pointing to the fact that about half of trash dumped in New Hampshire landfills comes from out of state.

The Dalton project “just makes no sense to me,” she said, stressing her concern that the local water, currently uncontaminated by PFAS, or per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, could be polluted by the harmful chemicals linked to numerous health problems.

“Why would we put a landfill right in the middle of a place that is pristine?” she said.

Laurie Boswell and her niece Libbie Wilson said their family has had a home on Forest Lake on the Whitefield side since 1962. They want to turn on the tap and trust the water is clean.

They used to get their water from a spring in the lake, “but not now,” Boswell said. They’ve dug a new well on the property as a precaution, she said, “but you shouldn’t have to do that.”

“You just don’t imagine it in such a beautiful place,” Wilson said of the proposed landfill. “It makes zero sense whatsoever.”

“You couldn’t throw a dart and pick a worse spot than the sand and gravel,” Boswell said.

The family has attended a number of rallies together. On Wednesday, Wilson held a homemade Cheshire cat (it took about a week to make, she said), and Boswell carried a sign asking, “What could possibly go wrong?”

Wilson said it was a mixture of fear and sadness when she first heard of the project.

“Just time to armor up and fight,” Wilson said. “You know, what else could we do? It’s just such a beautiful place to be destroyed like that. No way.”



Libbie Wilson (left) and her aunt Laurie Boswell (right) are worried the landfill could affect their drinking water. (Claire Sullivan | New Hampshire Bulletin)