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## Bethlehem Board Rejects Casella Trash Pickup Bid

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The Bethlehem Select Board on Monday rejected a bid by Casella Waste Systems, which proposed options for curbside trash and recycling pickup after its existing curbside service ends when its landfill in Bethlehem reaches capacity and closes after 2026. (Photo contributed by Casella Waste Systems)

Citing “sticker shock” and no need to make a decision right away, the Bethlehem Select Board on Monday voted to reject a bid by Casella Waste Systems, which submitted a proposal for curbside trash pickup.

Since 2012, the company has provided trash and recycling pickup at no charge, as part of a legal agreement approved by voters that allowed a 10-acre expansion of Casella's existing commercial landfill, which includes a transfer station that the town currently uses. In return, the company agreed not to pursue further expansion.

With the landfill now expected to reach capacity and close some time after 2026, the town has been advancing plans to build its own transfer station, with recyclables and waste to be hauled to the Mt. Carberry landfill near Berlin.



The bid for curbside pickup was initially requested by the town's transfer station committee, on the rationale that Bethlehem should find out sooner rather than later if curbside pickup was even economically feasible to plan for, said Nancy Strand, chair of the Select Board.

"Casella was the only bid that we received," she said.

The company offered three options: the first costs \$510,444 annually for weekly trash and single-stream recycling pickup, a service similar to what the town currently has; the second costs \$417,636 annually for weekly municipal solid waste/trash collection only; and the third is hauling from Bethlehem's yet-to-be-built transfer station to Mt. Carberry, with \$700 per trip and \$360 a month for the container rental and a recommendation of three containers.

“The additional request that they put in the proposal was they want to agree on extension terms to follow the initial three-year period,” said Strand. “They say that pricing is valid 30 days from submission, and since we received the submission two weeks ago, that means these prices are probably not going to be valid if we were to use them when the time comes. They also say that all prices increase annually by a minimum of 5 percent, and they also say that fees can be adjusted to cover increased costs with a 30-day notice.”

Residents and businesses would keep the company’s existing trash and recyclable bins.

Casella’s proposal includes a fuel fee, which is based on energy and environmental fee tables, but Strand said she doesn’t understand how the fees would be charged to the town.

“I did the numbers,” said Selectman Casey MacDonald. “Per bin, they’re looking to rent 1,300 bins, which I’m assuming is the number they have now, and it works out to under \$8 a week. But I think the hard part is you’re trying to pass that cost onto the whole town. That’s a big pill to swallow. We’re looking at 20 percent of the overall operating budget just for trash pickup.”

“I appreciate the transfer station committee seeking out all different venues for options,” said Selectman Mike Bruno. “But I think the term I would use is ‘sticker shock.’ I didn’t realize if we were to continue doing what we have, it’s over half a million dollars a year.”

During the July 14 Select Board meeting, board members discussed the possibility of taking out a bond for 10 or 20 years to spread out the cost to pay for a town-owned transfer station, which would cost about \$1 million.

They noted that several grant applications were not successful, and there are still no guarantees about the \$750,000 in federal funding that has been set aside for the transfer station, which would be located on a town-owned parcel along Route 116 near the Whitefield town line and would need to begin construction in 2026.

Any bond would need voter approval at town meeting.

There's an investment from the town to take out a bond to build a transfer station, as well as operational costs, but having a commercial vendor for pickup is not viable, said Bruno.

As an example, the towns of Tilton and Northfield use Casella, and up until last year, they had double bins for recycling and municipal waste, he said.

At a friend's house in Tilton, Bruno said he asked where he could put a can for recycling and was told the town doesn't recycle anymore.



“Because of the cost, they reduced what they were budgeting for and went to municipal waste only, so now everyone throws all their recycling in the garbage because there’s no recycling pickup,” said Bruno. “So Option 2 might be cheaper, but we’re going to end up having more waste because everyone can put their recycling in the garbage. But then you look at Option 1, at \$510,000-plus that’s a really hard pill to swallow. That’s just my 2 cents.

“I completely agree with those 2 cents,” said Select Board member April Hibberd.

“I spoke to a couple of residents since the proposal came in who were definitely in favor of keeping Casella in town and expanding the landfill,” said Strand. “I know we have residents who feel that way. Sticker shock will do a lot to probably bring those people out in higher numbers.”

“Several years ago, a member of our committee reached out to a major waste hauler that was not affiliated with the Casella organization,” said Barry Zitser, who serves on the transfer station committee. “We already knew what the Casella organization held as a cost of curbside pickup because they have their periodic goodwill mailings to town residents. And I will say that their bid is consistent with what they put in those mailings. At that time, and we concluded this several years ago, the cost of curbside pickup, even if it was just limited to solid waste, would be prohibitively expensive. However, one of our town consultants who operates another transfer station suggested we shouldn’t rule out curbside pickup without getting further information.”

Zitser recommended that the Select Board send a letter to Casella stating the board is not going to accept any bids and then revisit the issue when the town gets closer to building and operating its own transfer station, when hauling charges become more fixed and with the possibility of attracting more competition.

It can be difficult to get accurate bids and estimates when the town is two years out from needing services, said MacDonald.

Zitser and Strand also said the Bethlehem Village District used to provide pickup services for village residents, and there is the possibility of it doing so again. Several months ago, Strand, as a member of the committee, spoke to the district commissioners about the possibility.

Regardless of how it plays out, Strand said she can say with almost 100 percent certainty that prices will not go lower.

At some point, residents must decide if they want to go from the current single-stream recycling to sort recycling, which would require a change, she said.

“If you want to save money in pay-as-you throw bags, you’re going to want to sort your recycles,” said Strand. “At some point, we’re going to decide as residents if we want to make a real concerted effort to not throw everything in a landfill for lots of reasons. I just think change is coming and change can always be hard, and so the best that we can do is to prepare.”

The board voted 5-0 to decline the Casella proposal at present.

No one from Casella spoke at Monday’s meeting on behalf of the company’s proposal.

Whether pickup costs and increases would remain mostly stable in Bethlehem remains to be seen.

According to a June 29 story in the Concord Monitor, the municipality of Bow is expected to see a 42-percent increase in trash and recycling costs in the coming year through a new contract with Casella Waste Systems, which in 2023 acquired Pinard Waste, the town’s longtime hauler.

“The change to Casella is costing us quite a lot, and I wish there were other options for us to consider,” Angela Brennan, vice-chair of the Bow Select Board, said at a 2025 meeting. “But it seems like they have a hold on the market and that’s a little concerning.”

Since its founding in 1975, the company’s net worth has exceeded \$7 billion, and its stock price has increased nearly 70 percent in the past half-decade, according to the Monitor.