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Bethlehem Doesn't Need Casella - Julie Seely

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Bethlehem Doesn't Need Casella

To the Editor:

Casella Waste Systems has owned the Bethlehem landfill for 25 years now, and for 25 years they have been violating our trust. And now they want us to re-up for another 20 years? Um, no.

Last week, in their most recent bait and switch, Casella applied for a tax abatement. What does that mean?

1) It means that a half-BILLION-dollar company that claims that we can trust them is challenging the town to have their taxes reduced by a relatively paltry (to them) \$200,000. Fortunately, the Select Board anticipated this and it is already worked into our tax rate. NCES's tax ploy is, in fact the second largest contributor (after schools) to the increase in our tax bills — nearly \$1.00/thousand last year!

2) It means that Casella has just shown us that they will exploit any loophole — and that they can find loopholes even in documents that were thoroughly reviewed by our own former Town Attorney, Brenda Keith. Casella has admitted that their own attorneys wrote Articles 4 and 22. How many loopholes do you think they slipped in this time? Why should we trust them?

3) It means that Casella has just admitted that the published financial benefit numbers from last year's proposed HCA were grossly overstated, with the tax estimates nearly double what they would have actually paid. And Casella VP Joseph Fusco told the Caledonian-Record that the \$53.7m figure referred to in Article 22 relies on the very same numbers that they are now disputing!

4) Since abatements can take time to resolve, it means that if Article 22 passes, and the Select Board rushes into a deal quickly, we could find the value of that deal slashed shortly after execution, if the abatement is granted. Tricked by Casella again. And rushing into a deal without a townwide

vote is exactly what expansion proponents “Believe in Bethlehem” advocate. Appallingly, they even oppose Article 25, which would give Bethlehem residents the right to vote on any final proposal!

5) It also means — per the company’s own admission at the September 25 Select Board meeting — that NCES is charging North Country towns a significantly higher per-ton tipping fee (possibly as much as double!) than they charge southern NH and out-of-state towns! That doesn’t sound like much of a New Hampshire “Public Benefit” to me, but it sure sounds great for the 36% of waste that’s coming in from southern New England states.

And one final question that NCES hasn’t ever answered: the ten acres that voters approved in 2012 lasted ten years. Why do they now want 100 acres for twenty years? Will they be sending us all of the waste that can no longer be dumped in Southbridge, Massachusetts, since that landfill is slated for closure this year? Other states impose annual tonnage maximums as a condition of their permits, but New Hampshire does not. NCES argues that they will “only” be filling 70 acres of the 100-acre parcel, but that’s little consolation. It’s still about triple the current per-acre fill rate. That is truly scary.

The division in our small town — neighbors lobbing insults such as “radical”, “elitist” and last week even “racist” (say what?) — will not go away unless we stand firm and usher this company out the door. And with the 2012 Settlement Agreement, we have the legal right to do so. A “Yes” vote dooms our own children to this same divisiveness fifteen years from now when Casella inevitably comes back for more.

Great things are happening in Bethlehem — a Special Exception for a new \$15 million dollar conference center that is fully within Bethlehem was just approved at Bretton Woods this week, with construction to start this summer. We are a town full of energy and passion. Let’s direct it toward moving our town into its next chapter. We don’t need Casella.

Vote NO on 4 and 22, and YES on 20 and 25.

Julie Seely

Bethlehem, New Hampshire