

Bethlehem:Concerns Voiced On Landfill Truck Traffic Through Downtown

Public Input Session Scheduled For Dec. 20

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Bethlehem selectmen have scheduled a public input session for Dec. 20 to get feedback from residents on the proposal by Casella Waste Systems to route trucks through downtown Bethlehem along Main Street/Route 302 to a new proposed landfill in Dalton. (Courtesy photo)

The prospect of big trash haulers going through downtown Bethlehem to a proposed Casella Waste Systems in Dalton has some residents voicing concerns about safety and nuisance, and Bethlehem selectmen scheduling a public input session to compile residents' comments and submit them to state agencies.

During their meeting on Monday, the Bethlehem Board of Selectmen set the input session for 6 p.m. on Dec. 20.

Under Casella's current proposal, trucks from the north would come down southbound Interstate 91 to southbound Interstate 93, leave the interstate at Exit 40 and go east on Route 302/Main Street through Bethlehem, then north on Route 3 at Twin Mountain, before traveling south on Route 116 in Whitefield and back through Bethlehem to the landfill in Dalton.

Although the Casella route proposal is not new and was common knowledge to a number of residents in 2020, Selectman Chris Jensen said he asked that the topic be put on Monday's meeting agenda after he observed heavy Casella truck traffic through downtown Bethlehem on Sept. 3 after Route 3 in Bethlehem was closed down and traffic was routed along Bethlehem's Main Street following a crash involving two tractor-trailers.

"The plan they proposed some time ago says they are expected to average about 102 truck trips per day, 20 percent more than the Bethlehem fill rates," said Jensen.

Selectman Bruce Caplain said 102 truckloads per day is one way.

"You have to remember that's round trip, it's 200 trucks," he said.

Jensen said under the Casella proposal, weekday truck traffic would last from 6 a.m. to 5 p.m. with occasional Saturdays.

"It just occurred to me that maybe we ought to consider giving residents an opportunity to comment on their plans and then we can compile those comments and share them with appropriate state agencies and leaders," he said.

Some residents on Monday already got ahead on their input.

Joanne Blaney, a South Road resident, said she finds it ironic and upsetting that the day could come when Casella's landfill along Trudeau Road in Bethlehem closes (there, trucks come up and down Route 3 from Interstate 93 and bypass Main Street), and then if the landfill in Dalton is approved truck traffic would go along Main Street in Bethlehem to the new landfill.

"They'll be coming up the top of the hill and then on our beautiful, pristine, so-special Main Street, and all of these trucks would be going by the country club, by little restaurants, outdoor areas, patios, our stores, our elementary school and kids going to school," she said. "All of these trucks added to our regular truck traffic."

A traffic study was completed on current traffic on Main Street, which has a lot of blind streets that connect to it, said Blaney.

“I’m thinking of concerns about traffic as it is now and adding all that Casella traffic on top of that,” she said. “Picture how this will deeply impact our Main Street and summer business as it is now.”

Blaney said the 2019 Casella truck accident in Coventry, Vt. spilled 8,000 gallons and she is worried about a similar incident spilling into the Ammonoosuc River.

“If all those trucks are coming through Bethlehem, it’s not if there’s going to be an accident, it’s when there’s going to be an accident,” she said. “I’m not criticizing the driving abilities of the truckers. I’m here as a concerned citizen. I just encourage other Bethlehem people to speak up because this is really big and will affect our town greatly.”

Also voicing concerns was Randy Smith, a Bethlehem resident who lives along Whitefield Road/Route 116 near the location of the proposed landfill in Dalton.

The speed limit on that segment of Route 116 is posted at 50 mph, but motorists and truckers routinely drive above it and any more truck traffic added on a route that has already had its share of accidents, some fatal, would make for an even more unsafe road, he said.

“There was an accident there yesterday,” said Smith. “And Bethlehem has to respond to that. You add 200 trucks, and that’s just their trucks, and you are still going to have private vehicles, construction vehicles, increasing that traffic going into that proposed landfill. God forbid if a catastrophe happens. A truck flips over on that road, affecting the wetlands, the Ammonoosuc, it’s all right there.”

Whitefield resident, Eliot Wessler, who is president of the North Country Alliance for Balanced Change, a group that opposes the proposed landfill site in Dalton beside Forest Lake State Park, said Whitefield would be impacted by truck traffic even more and it seems unfair that Littleton is untouched by Casella’s proposed route.

“It’s very galling to other smaller, less powerful communities in the North Country,” he said. “It’s very clear through internal communications between DOT [the New Hampshire Department of Transportation] and Casella that the reason that trucks are not going to be routed through Littleton is because Littleton has a lot of political power and they just don’t want to have to tangle with Littleton. They’re willing to tangle with Bethlehem because they think it’s going to be easier to shove towns like Bethlehem and Twin Mountain and Whitefield around.”

No one from Casella spoke or addressed any concerns during Monday's meeting, which was in-person at the town hall and also had a remote Zoom option.

To date, neither DOT nor the New Hampshire Department of Environmental Services has granted Casella a permit for operating the commercial landfill in Dalton that would be called the Granite State Landfill.

Total truck count estimates differ, according to public records.

In Casella's own traffic study submitted to DOT in September 2020, the company states that the landfill operation would average about 102 truck trips per day (20 percent above the Bethlehem fill rates), of which about 50 trucks would be larger vehicles like the 18-wheeler semi-tractor trailers (FHWA WB-67 type).

According to the Jan. 29, 2020 scoping meeting minutes between the DOT and Casella representatives, Casella engineer John Gay said estimated truck traffic is expected to be 100 WB-67 trucks per day, excluding local contractor traffic and smaller vehicles and passenger vehicles, and also excluding truck operations at Chick's Sand and Gravel.

Casella wants to avoid conflicts with residents and businesses in downtown Littleton that would be caused by trucks, Gay had told DOT, according to the minutes.

Earlier in the year, DOT spokesperson Eileen Meaney told The Caledonian-Record that a request had been made by Casella to revise the Jan. 29, 2020 meeting minutes.

As of Tuesday, the minutes had not been officially updated.

On April 21, Gay wrote to DOT to say there was a preliminary discussion on Jan. 29, 2020, about traffic and he is perplexed about where the reference to estimate of 100 WB-67 trucks come.

"However, the traffic study for the project filed with your office in October 2020 provides clarity on the subject," Gay wrote. "As detailed in the traffic study, the Granite State Landfill operation is expected to generate approximately 102 truck trips a day, of which around 50 trucks would be the larger vehicles such as 18-wheeler semi-tractor trailers."