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Casella Pulls Dalton Wetlands Permit Application

Plans Are To Resubmit Next Year

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Casella Waste Systems engineer Joe Gay speaks during a public hearing Wednesday at White Mountains Regional High School on the company's plans to build a landfill in Dalton. The company is seeking a wetlands permit, though the vast majority of residents turning out urged the state to deny the permit. (Photo by Robert Blechl)

Amid intensifying scrutiny on the proposed Granite State Landfill in Dalton, Casella Waste Systems has pulled its amended wetlands application with the state.

On Friday, company CEO John Casella issued a letter to the town of Dalton notifying municipal officials and residents of his intention to withdraw the permit application with the New Hampshire Department of Environmental Services, saying it will be resubmitted some time in 2022 at the same

time the company submits other applications, among them a state alteration of terrain permit application and a permit application for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

“I wanted to make sure to reach out to you directly so you would read it from me,” Casella wrote. “This decision was not made lightly as it comes at a significant cost to our company, but was made for several reasons.”

One reason, he said, is that DES had expressed interest in coordinating its review of the wetlands application permit with other state and federal permit applications.

Another is the additional time will allow the company to perform more field work to support the multiple applications, said Casella.

“This decision will also allow us to take into consideration the public opinion that we have gathered, and will continue to solicit, through this process,” said Casella.

In July in Whitefield, DES held a public hearing on the wetlands permit application, which drew a large showing of residents, with more than 100 gathering outside to protest a landfill and just five of the 59 people who gave testimony speaking in favor.

The plan is for a total 180-acre landfill area that would involve the destruction of 17 acres of wetlands.

In August, DES requested that Casella amend its wetlands application so it can coordinate that application with the other applications.

That decision drew criticism from opponents, who said DES already held the July 14 public hearing on the wetlands application and told the public it would issue a decision on the application no later than October 2021.

Before the company’s announcement on Friday, the revised plan was to submit an amended wetlands application by this Wednesday, with DES to issue an approval or denial no later than December 2022.

In his letter to Dalton, Casella said, “Those who have opposed this project from the outset will broadcast their own viewpoint about the process and the project, but the reality is that New Hampshire will be facing a waste disposal capacity shortfall based on its current permitted capacity.

Without the new landfill capacity in Dalton and recycling infrastructure in another part of the state that we have proposed, the cost to New Hampshire will be high both environmentally and economically. This project continues to be of vital importance to New Hampshire's health and environmental safety infrastructure, and we intend to see it through to completion."

A growing number of residents, though, are arguing that landfills in the Granite State would have more capacity if less out-of-state waste was brought into New Hampshire, and it is no sure thing that disposal costs would increase if there is no landfill in Dalton.

On Monday, Eliot Wessler, a Whitefield resident and secretary of the North Country Alliance for Balanced Change, a group opposed to the proposed landfill site, said it's currently unclear what Casella's application withdrawal means, but it seems to imply that the company will not meet DES's deadline and its self-imposed deadline for filing the amended application, and Casella is looking for more time.

The hope is that more time will allow Dalton's wetlands scientist to do more geomorphological analysis on the site, said Wessler.

"For a long time, they had refused to permit him to have access on the site during the growing season, which is exactly the time he needs to do inventory to determine impacts on wetlands and vernal pools," said Wessler. "Another thing that caught my eye is John Casella seems to be saying, 'we have your input already and we're going to get more input, and this gives us a chance to get more input and we'll consider it.' I don't see how Casella couldn't interpret the input that they've already gotten, that there's massive opposition, not only in Dalton, but in the surrounding communities where the impacts will be the greatest."

Syncing up applications for environmental regulators is not unreasonable, but it's wrong to focus just on the first phase of wetlands impacts when there will be multiple phases of landfill expansion with broader impacts, he said.

"There's no question that this is going to be a multi-phased project and therefore making a decision as to whether it's a viable and worthwhile project," said Wessler. "Good for the residents of New Hampshire on the basis of phase one alone is nuts."

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