

Advocates express skepticism about Casella Waste Systems' fuel assistance offer for Dalton residents

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Dalton town offices, sign, Dalton, NH. Mara Hoplamazian photo / NHPR

Casella Waste Systems is offering a winter heating fuel assistance program just for residents of Dalton, where the company is hoping to build a controversial landfill.

Casella submitted new permit applications for the proposed landfill in October, after withdrawing applications in late 2021. Landfill opponents have asked the state to suspend reviewing the landfill permit applications, as new solid waste rules are finalized and cases in front of the New Hampshire Supreme Court are resolved.

Local advocates have raised questions about whether the company is attempting to influence local sentiments about the landfill project – or votes in upcoming elections – by making the offer.

Wayne Morrison is the president of the advocacy group North Country Alliance for Balanced Change,

which has fought against the landfill. He said he supports companies helping communities and doing charitable work.

“The skeptic in me, however, would say it’s kind of a complicated story where there’s a controversial project underway. To me, it’s somewhat transparent that Casella is trying to make nice with certain people to sway their decision process moving forward,” he said.

The program is being offered through the Gilman Senior Center in Gilman, Vermont, but is not open to residents of Gilman, or any other towns besides Dalton, according to Casella.

Advocates said people in Dalton have been offered 100 gallons of free fuel oil. The company did not directly confirm that number.

Morrison noted that other towns, like Whitefield, Littleton, Bethlehem, and Carroll, could be affected by the traffic and other impacts from a landfill in Dalton, but are not being offered fuel assistance.

The point of contact for Dalton residents looking to get heating assistance from Casella is Pamela Kathan, the director of the Gilman Senior Center.

Kathan is a candidate for the Coos District 1 seat vacated by former Republican Rep. Troy Merner, who resigned and was recently arrested and charged with wrongful voting and other charges after an investigation determined he hadn’t been living in his district for more than a year. She also currently serves as Dalton’s town moderator.

Kathan is running as a Republican and faces a primary election Tuesday, Dec. 5 against Sean Durkin of Northumberland. She has been a vocal proponent of Casella, and a supporter of the company's landfill proposal, but has said she does not work or speak for the company.

The winner of the primary is expected to face Cathleen Fountain, a Democrat and Dalton resident, in a special election for Merner's former seat on Jan. 23, 2024.

On Kathan's involvement, Morrison said it "seems a bit of a conflict of interest to me, but that's not my call."

Jon Swan, who has been a staunch opponent of the landfill for multiple years, wrote to the New Hampshire Attorney General's office about the offer of fuel assistance, noting that Kathan was involved.

"It smacks of influence peddling, as well as the potential collection of voter information, and such, especially of the elderly in the area, in my opinion," he wrote.

The Attorney General's office told NHPR the Election Law Unit would review the allegations made by Swan and determine whether to open an investigation, but would not comment on pending complaints or investigations.

The New Hampshire Secretary of State's office says they have not received any filings or reports from Kathan and Durkin, which is not unusual for a special election, they said, because candidates only need to report receipts and expenditures over \$1,000.

Fountain's filings can be found here.

In a statement, Casella spokesperson Jeff Weld characterized criticism of the assistance program and Kathan's involvement as "unsubstantiated vitriol."

"Over the past two years we have worked with volunteers at the Gilman Senior Center to help revitalize and reopen a much needed resource in the community. Casella makes similar commitments to creating vibrant and sustainable communities throughout our operations, and this is no different," he wrote. "These programs are necessary for many in our communities, and we are proud to help support those in need, rather than shame and embarrass those who are trying to help."

The company did not respond to questions about the number of people who have benefitted from the assistance program, or the amount of money Casella has spent on the program.

The Gilman Senior Center did not respond to multiple requests for comment. Kathan also did not respond to a request for comment.

Offers of financial benefits to Dalton

This is the second year Casella has offered heating assistance to Dalton residents. Last year, about a month before town elections in March, the company released a promotional video announcing funding for renovations at the Gilman Senior Center. A few days before the election, they announced the fuel assistance program, exclusively for Dalton residents. Kathan appeared in both videos.

Casella's heating assistance offer may serve as a compelling alternative or addition to the state's fuel

assistance program, which some Granite Staters said was difficult to navigate during last winter's expensive heating season.

The company said their decision to offer the heating assistance program again this year was in part because they heard last year it was more accessible than other programs.

"Through our outreach work there and in conversations with many residents, it became apparent that there was significant need, and that people were having difficulty accessing funds through other programs," said Weld, Casella's spokesperson.

The company has offered other financial benefits to Dalton if the landfill comes into town – including paying the town \$2 million a year, or covering every resident's property taxes.

Those offers could be particularly compelling in Dalton, where the local poverty rate is more than double the state's average. What to do about the competing promise of tax relief and the possibility of potentially polluting trash becoming a part of the community, has caused major division in Dalton.

In a letter to the editor of the Caledonian Record last month, Kathan urged Dalton residents to encourage the select board to negotiate with Casella for financial benefits.

"Relief does not come after the fact, and the fact is that Casella is coming to town, soon, so wake up and smell the coffee folks before you lose out," she wrote.