Updated Articles Below:

Casella searches for a landfill site

Nov 17, 2003 (Updated Oct 17, 2018)

By MADELINE BODIN Herald Correspondent

ROCKINGHAM - For 12 years, Thornton Lillie had been quietly and privately trying to sell his 170 acres between the section of Route 5 known as Missing Link Road and the Connecticut River in Rockingham. He had contacted a lot of waste companies, so he doesn't remember exactly when he approached Casella Waste Systems about buying the site for a landfill, only that the company was interested. "We have a strong desire to strengthen our presence in southern Vermont," said Mark Popham, landfill development coordinator at Casella Waste Systems. "At the same time, almost by coincidence, we had this offer. Things just seemed to flow together."

Margaret Perry of Upper Meadows Road remembers precisely that it was February 2003 when the real estate agent called her about her barn. The call was unexpected, so she had to call back to ask why the real estate agent was even interested in her barn. That's when she learned about the proposed landfill. On March 13, a group of neighbors from the area of Upper Meadows Road and Missing Link Road in Rockingham registered Missing Link Preservation LLC, a limited liability company, with the state of Vermont. Perry explained that Missing Link Preservation is a land trust, which buys and protects land near the site of the proposed landfill. The group closed on its first property in April. It owns 34 acres and has an option to by 55 acres adjacent to the proposed landfill.

Casella Waste Systems President James Bohlig held a meeting with area residents at the Hartness House in Springfield on May 14. There was no formal presentation or written materials. Casella had come just to talk. Among the facts neighbors remember from the meeting were that the landfill would be in operation for 20 to 25 years, it would be double lined, it would be constructed in five-acre cells and that trucks would come from up to 100 miles away to bring waste to the site.

On June 3 the Rockingham Select Board met with Bohling and Michael Viani of Casella about the landfill behind closed doors in executive session. When the board adjourned from executive session, the meeting minutes say, Rockingham Town Manager Shane O'Keefe expressed concern that the company's presentation did not adhere to the state's Open Meeting Law, and that as both landowner and Select Board member, Lillie should excuse himself from any meeting where the landfill would be discussed. The landfill was placed on the agenda for the next Select Board meeting, which was held on June 17.

Viani and Charles Leonard, a senior vice president of Casella, made the presentation in an open session at this meeting, which was attended by nearly 30 neighbors from the area of the proposed landfill. A two-page proposal, "Rockingham Landfill, Preliminary Development Concepts," was entered into the minutes of this meeting. It bears a stamp that says it was received on June 3.

The preliminary concepts in the document included:

-Casella envisions the site accepting about 150,000 tons of waste per year, or 500 tons a day.

-There would be 12 to 16 trailer trucks and 20 to 25 smaller trucks bringing trash to the site each day.

-That the company was willing to buy surrounding properties for 1.25 to two times their fair market value and lease them back to the owners rent-free.

-That there could be a fee of $2 to $3 a ton paid to the town for out-of-town waste, which could amount to $375,000 a year.

In the meeting minutes, Select Board Chairman Lamont Barnett says the landfill issue will be an emotional and political issue for the community. He recommends a townwide vote and a series of public meetings. Also at that meeting, Missing Link Preservation presented a statement outlining its objections to the proposed landfill site. Before moving on to the next agenda item, the Select Board agreed to start scheduling meetings within the month.

"It is an unusual situation," said Popham of Casella's role in presenting the idea of a landfill to the town of Rockingham. Typically, municipalities come to Casella asking for its help with a landfill. "Most of my activities are responding to communities who have an interest in closing an old landfill and opening a new one," he said. On Aug. 10, the Friends and Neighbors of Missing Link Road held its first public meeting. While many of the most active members of this organization are also members of Missing Link Preservation, Perry explained that the "Friends and Neighbors" is a more general interest organization - "a group of people who oppose the siting of a landfill on the river."

The group reported that about 100 people attended that first meeting across Route 5 from the BFI landfill at the Hitormis Club in Rockingham. "Ironically, you can't drink the water there because of the leachate from the BFI dump," Perry said. The Browning-Ferris Industries landfill opened in 1968, but BFI did not purchase it until 1973. Other than its proximity a few miles north of the proposed site on Route 5, it is completely unrelated to the proposed landfill. It is owned by a competing waste management company. The BFI landfill closed in 1991. It is a Superfund site and has polluted several area wells.

Many audience members at the Rockingham Select Board's first public information meeting on Sept. 3 invoked the BFI landfill in questions directed at Casella representatives and the Select Board.

The meeting had been moved to the town's Falls Cinema to accommodate the crowd of nearly 200. Casella representatives presented few hard numbers at the meeting, frustrating neighbors who previously had heard specifics from the company.

At a Select Board meeting following the meeting Sept. 3, Barnett recommended that the Select Board postpone the scheduled slate of public information meetings until Casella was more prepared, according to the meeting minutes. Representatives from Friends and Neighbors of Missing Link Road urged the Select Board to stay on schedule. As a compromise, the Select Board agreed to hold the next scheduled meeting, which was to discuss environmental impacts. In spite of the emotional reception of Casella's presentation, that first meeting did not change Casella's plans or expectations, reported Popham.

It was the second public information meeting, held on Oct. 1, that sent the company back to the workbench. The company must always find locations that meet the state Agency of Natural Resources' siting requirements for landfills, he said. But they also make every attempt to find sites that meet any other criteria a town might have for a landfill location.

After attending the October public information meeting, Popham's team felt that a wider search for a landfill location that could meet both the state's and the community's criteria was warranted. "It's not so much crumpling (the previous plan) up and throwing it away, as taking another look," he said. He added that it is possible that after examining many locations, the community could decide this first location was the best site for a landfill after all.

"There is a perception by some folks that this is happening too quickly," Popham said. Casella has no reason to hurry the process, he explained. It has signed no contracts and has no obligations. Popham said that he wants to work within the community's comfort level on a timetable for the proposed landfill. A proposal before the Rockingham Planning Commission may give Casella a reason to hurry or to lose the possibility of using Lillie's land for a landfill altogether.

The proposal would create a Natural Resource Overlay District to the town's zoning bylaw. The purpose of the district would be to exclude power plants, transmission lines or regional solid waste facilities from the Connecticut River and nearby lands to protect the natural resources found there. Those facilities would be allowed in the town anywhere other than the Overlay District. The proposed Natural Resource Overlay District includes the proposed landfill site.

A public hearing on the proposed overlay district is scheduled for the Woman's Club Room in the Rockingham Town Hall in Bellows Falls at 7 p.m. Wednesday, Dec. 3.

<https://www.rutlandherald.com/news/casella-searches-for-a-landfill-site/article_cdf77991-1dc5-52ef-96ab-7913d2034e29.html>