

Taxes and trash: How a proposed Casella landfill continues to divide Dalton

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As voters shuffled out of the snow and into Dalton's municipal building Tuesday night, the mood was tense. The room, a former elementary school gymnasium, was packed. The town moderator went through the rules: no disorderly conduct, no flash photography. There was an uneventful vote on whether to buy a new dump truck.

Then came the question many showed up for: Should the town abolish its conservation commission?

The vote was part of a campaign to get rid of two key local boards: the conservation commission and the planning board. A group of Dalton residents petitioned to put the existence of both public bodies up to a vote, saying they were biased and didn't represent the needs of the whole town.

The effort failed, and the boards were preserved. But the debate was in many ways a stand-in for a larger issue that has divided the town and taken up the air at public meetings for years: a landfill development proposed by the company Casella Waste Systems. The company hopes to build a new landfill next to Forest Lake State Park, not far from another landfill they own in Bethlehem.



Mara Hoplamazian / NHPR

Fred Anderson stands outside his home on Forest Lake.

The debate over that landfill has raised questions familiar to many small communities in New Hampshire: How should a town balance desires to protect the environment with calls for more services, and the associated need for tax revenue? What are the trade-offs between growth and preservation? And what role should businesses play in shaping development?

"It's a tragedy, but it's the tragedy of division that comes to these small towns when a big corporation

comes in," said Fred Anderson, a retired minister living on the part of Forest Lake in Dalton's neighboring town, Whitefield. He says he's watched as bitterness has crept into the region, as people discuss what should happen next.

Trash and taxes

While the landfill proposal has been a recurring topic of the debate for years, it was at the center of much of this week's town meeting.

Scott Kleinschrodt, a former schoolteacher and Dalton resident who supports the landfill, told the crowd he felt the conservation commission was only working to serve a small group of people: those who live on Forest Lake, many of whom have been active opponents of the landfill.

"Look at the conservation commission's activities," he said. "They spend all their time on an anti-property rights vendetta. They go after a single landowner and a single project."



Mara Hoplamazian / NHPR

Scott Kleinschrodt stands outside of his home in Dalton.

The landowner he referenced is Doug Ingerson, also known as "Chick." He owns the land where Casella

hopes to open the landfill. He's served on the town's conservation commission on and off since at least 2015, but has been off since 2020.

Ingerson has tried to turn his land into a variety of businesses over the years, including a racetrack, a 500-site campground and a landfill.

All of those proposals have faced pushback from other residents, who have raised concerns about noise, smells, water pollution and heavier traffic. But others say developments like the kind Ingerson has proposed would bring more tax revenue into town.

"There's no downtown, there's no commercial. You have the top of the hill store, you have a motorcycle repair shop right there, you have a couple automobile backyard mechanics," Kleinschrodt told NHPR. "What Ingerson has in his industrial park is pretty much it."

The pressure to bring in more development is even stronger, he says, because of New Hampshire's reliance on property taxes — a system he calls "antiquated." Kleinschrodt hopes bigger businesses, and the taxes they pay, could help bring back services the town has cut over the years. He wants the town to rehire a police officer, and maybe host meals for seniors and an after-school program. Casella hasn't been shy about sweetening the deal for the town if it puts in a landfill. In a proposal from 2020, the company said they'd pay the town \$2 million a year, or cover every resident's property taxes, if the landfill were approved.

About a month before Dalton's Town Meeting, the company released a promotional video on Facebook

announcing funding for a senior center in Gilman, Vermont, which neighbors Dalton. A few days before the vote, they released another video saying they were starting a new fuel assistance program — just for residents of Dalton.



Mara Hoplamazian / NHPR

Jeanette Charon at work in the Dalton Municipal Building.

The company's promise of financial assistance carries some allure for many in Dalton, where the poverty rate is more than double the state average. Others say those promises distract from the long-term costs that could come with hosting a major facility like the landfill.

"All the trucks, the environment, the garbage that blows out of the trucks and now has to be picked up on the roadside, accidents, environmental concerns," said Jeanette Charon, Dalton's town clerk and tax collector. "There's a lot of different things that come into play that are going to cost taxpayers, not just in money, but in resources and possibly in health." Charon says the landfill controversy has brought a new kind of ugliness to town. Sometimes, people make unkind faces at each other in meetings, she says, and social media has furthered the animosity.

Fighting back, 'like the sledgehammer in a toolbox'



Zoey Knox / NHPR

A sign outside of Dalton's town meeting on Tuesday night.

Perhaps the most prolific poster is the chair of Dalton's conservation commission, Jon Swan, who lives near the lake.

Swan's tactics have been controversial. He films public meetings and his interactions with landfill supporters, then puts them on YouTube. He has a history of confrontation, once forming what he advertised as a "militia group" in upstate New York. And he was sued for defamation by Casella a week after posting a video meme comparing the company's CEO to Hitler.

"I'm fighting to defend something that I love," Swan said. "So, you know, if you're going to get in my way, I'm like the sledgehammer in a toolbox."

Swan is just one of the advocates fighting the landfill, along with other groups like the North Country Alliance for Balanced Change and the Forest Lake Association.



Mara Hoplamazian / NHPR

Jon Swan stands at the entrance to Forest Lake State Park.

But he sees the conservation commission as one of the town's only tools when it comes to opposing the landfill at the regulatory level. He says it's Dalton's way to weigh in on the permit applications Casella needs to submit to the state's Department of Environmental Services. The commission has set aside \$15,000 to assess the impacts of the landfill and work with state regulators.

Swan's concerns about the landfill are wide-reaching. He's worried about contaminants moving from the landfill into the lake, and into the groundwater that people drink. He's worried about more trucks coming up north, the accidents they could cause. He's worried about the sounds and the smells.

And he doesn't want Dalton to become a dumping ground for the entire region. In 2020, nearly 2 million tons of trash went into landfills or incinerators, according to New Hampshire's solid waste plan. Almost half of that trash was from other states, and out-of-state trash is overwhelmingly put into commercial landfills like the one Casella is proposing.

"I never in the world imagined that there would be citizens in the town that would advocate for a mega landfill that's going to bring toxic garbage from out of state into their town," he said.

Though Swan acknowledges his actions have caused tension, he says the real source of the division in town is Casella.

"Dalton is being taken advantage of by a very powerful, wealthy corporation," he said. "And it's a shame what they've done to the town."

A place for trash



Zoey Knox/NHPR

Voters braved snow to make it out to Dalton's town meeting this year.

Casella denies they've targeted Dalton to take advantage. Jeff Weld, the company's director of communications, says they need a landfill because trash needs to go somewhere.

"We are providing a service that's necessary for modern life," Weld said. "We're not creating the waste. We're not putting these kinds of materials into the waste stream. But what we are very good at is managing them and doing so in a way that protects the environment."

Landfilling is at the bottom of New Hampshire's waste management hierarchy, under other options like reducing trash at the source, recycling, and composting. And Casella says they're hoping to help the state "achieve their waste management goals" by developing modern recycling infrastructure. But despite the years of pushback, the company says they still think Dalton is a good place for a landfill.

"You need a place that's large enough, that's accessible, that meets the environmental criteria," Weld said. "You need a landowner that is willing to sell a parcel of land. All of those things go into account."

He also notes that building a new landfill, instead of excavating an old facility, allows the company to use the latest technology for the project.

After withdrawing their initial applications last year, Weld says the company is planning to re-submit with some revisions, including reducing the impact on wetlands and making the site less visible.

Legislation moving through New Hampshire's State House could change the rules around where landfills can be located. And Casella expressed doubt recently in a statement to shareholders about whether they'd be able to get permits at all.

Meanwhile, Dalton still faces the question of whether to oppose the landfill, or welcome it.

One candidate for Dalton's selectboard, Tom Dubreuil, was supported by many in favor of the landfill and those who called for the abolition of the boards. (He won his election, but his challenger, Cathleen Fountain, requested a recount, which is scheduled for March 24.)

But Dubreil says he doesn't really want a landfill.

Nobody does.

"If I had my choice of rubbish, I'd like to find, maybe go in a desert somewhere where nobody lives and put it all there," he said. "I mean, let's face it, trash is not good."

Dubreil worries that even if the town opposes it, the landfill could come in anyway. He's heard about how the landfill could help with Dalton's finances. And if it's coming in, he says, he wants to negotiate.

"It is hard to fight somebody that's got all kinds of money to start with," he said. "And we're a small town, we can't afford it."