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FEATURED

## Federal Regulators Hear Landfill Concerns, Little Support, In Dalton

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Debi Warner, of Littleton, addresses a rally of landfill opponents prior to a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers public meeting at Dalton Town Hall on Wednesday. (Photo by Robert Black)

DALTON — Five years on, opponents continue to turn out and swamp supporters at public meetings for the commercial landfill proposed for Dalton.

About 100 area residents turned out to Dalton Town Hall on Wednesday, this time for a federal meeting hosted by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, featuring a first-of-its-kind topic in the formal discussion — environmental justice.

Per the Clean Water Act, UCACE is reviewing a permit application from Casella Waste Systems and has regulatory authority over discharges of dredged and fill material into U.S. waters, which include the Ammonoosuc River, a tributary of the Connecticut River.

Although UCACE does not have authority over landfilled trash, it is reviewing the construction plans of the leachate liner for the proposed 70-acre landfill and the infrastructure associated with it, including new roadways and improvements to existing ones.

Attending the meeting were five representatives of Casella, among them engineer Joe Gay, who, in his project presentation, said the proposed Granite State Landfill, planned near Chick's Sand and Gravel and beside Forest Lake, would provide 18 years of disposal capacity after the company's NCES landfill in Bethlehem closes in 2026 and has "excellent road infrastructure in a remote, yet accessible location."

A benefit to Dalton is a host community agreement that would include free curbside trash and recycling pickup and financial benefits, as well as an annual \$2 million property value protection plan and free acceptance of up to 1,000 tons per year of municipal solid waste and construction and demolition debris from the town transfer station, he said.

The project entails the destruction of nearly a dozen acres of wetlands, which drew concerns from several of the 31 residents and elected officials who spoke.

## Perspectives

Because the proposed landfill is near the town lines of Littleton, Bethlehem and Whitefield, residents, Select Board members and conservation commission members from those towns and others turned out to speak, including about the traffic, environmental, water quality, and other impacts they said their towns would incur.

Whitefield resident Dave Lynch said with the other towns being affected, he doesn't understand why Casella only speaks to Dalton.

Others asked UCACE to review Casella's record elsewhere and consider the company's leachate spills at its facilities in Bethlehem (154,000 gallons in 2021) and Coventry (nearly 9,000 gallons in 2024) and its documented leachate and other violations.

Pam Ladds, of Newport, Vt., said some might wonder why she attended the meeting in Dalton.

Ladds said she lives right "under the shade" of what she called "Mt. Trashmore," Casella's landfill in Coventry.

She said she listened to the "sales pitch of how much you can all benefit," then said, "that won't begin to cover a fraction of what it's like living under a landfill."

"I'm really here today as a water warrior," said Ladds. "The scarcest resource we have on this planet is water ... If we destroy water, if we destroy a pristine lake, and it's one of the few that's still here, like Forest Lake, we are absolutely bat-sh\*\* crazy. That makes no sense whatsoever. And there is a risk, no matter what. No matter how careful you guys are — and I believe you intend to be careful — accidents happened. It happened in Vermont, it happened in other states as well. Remember the precautionary principle — don't risk water, ever."

Wayne Morrison, a Whitefield resident and North Country Alliance For Balanced Change president, spoke of roads.

"Sometimes it's not what Casella says, it's what they don't say," said Morrison. "In the beginning, I think the comment was made that they selected this site because of the terrific roadways that lead to it. That could not be further from the truth ... The current proposed landfill brings 100-plus trash haulers through small rural communities that are ill-suited to that task and puts families, children, and people in facilities like hospitals and retirement homes at great risk."

Route 116 is a heavily trafficked highway and more trucks would create more of a hazard along a road that already has its share of crashes, which would also put an extra burden on Bethlehem first responders, said Bethlehem Select Board member Veronica Morris.

Dalton resident Adam Finkel asked UCACE to conduct a cost-benefit analysis and said he sees only costs to the region and no benefits.

“The only benefits I see with this project are private benefits,” said Eliot Wessler, of Whitefield.

The facility would serve a regional and not a local market, and alternative sites need to be considered, he said.

Andrea Bryant, an Ammonoosuc River Local Advisory Committee member, said the proposed landfill is five miles downriver from the Bethlehem landfill, which is discharging into the river and has high levels of PFAS and 1,4 dioxane.

Frank Lombardi, chairman of the Whitefield Conservation Commission, said several other landfill sites have had some development while the proposed site is “in its natural state.”

“The project calls for the destruction of at least 11 acres of wetlands and the clearing of 90 acres of forest, which I haven’t heard Casella discuss much, but I have found in their filings, and I think it’s very notable, that they plan to clear-cut, or as their description is, convert 90 acres of forest to unforest,” said Heidi Trimarco, an environmental attorney with the Conservation Law Foundation.

She said that the “significant scope and size” of the project will require an Environmental Impact Statement.

“The Corps must also consider the project as a whole,” said Trimarco. “You can’t consider segmentation. So we must consider Casella’s reasonable foreseeable plans to expand the landfill. Casella now says its plan is to operate for 18 years, but we all know the plan is to expand the landfill again and again and again. This is what happened in Bethlehem. We don’t have to look far ... This is their business plan.”

She said a larger facility was the company’s initial plan when it submitted its application three years ago.

“The first plan called for it to be developed in three phases,” said Trimarco. “At the state’s request, they withdrew that application and resubmitted the first stage. We’re just looking at the first stage now. We need to look at the larger impact, which originally called for 137,140 acres of landfill, not 70 acres. Our concerns are the significant harm to the waters and the environment.”

Whitefield resident Jeanne Robillard asked USACE to consider how a landfill could affect the nearby public water supply.

As for wetlands, they are critical for wildlife and what Casella is proposing “will impact the whole ecosystem,” said Dalton resident Jo Beth Dudley.

Two residents, including Michael Ryan, of Dalton, spoke in support.

“Landfills have been around a long time,” said Ryan. “They’ve learned how to make them better. This landfill will have two liners.”

Gay was the only representative from Casella who spoke at the meeting.

## Environmental Justice

As part of its review, USACE is required to identify the least environmentally damaging alternative and consider direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts.

The Corps is very early in the Casella process and has not yet fully reviewed the alternatives analysis, said Tammy Turley, chief of the regulatory branch of USACE’s New England district.

She said that its approval process for projects can take four months to several years.

If USACE decides to host one, a public hearing could follow Wednesday’s public meeting.

Following the 2-hour session for residents to comment and ask questions was a 1-hour roundtable discussion on environmental justice and meaningful engagement.

The community gets to decide what is meaningful engagement, said Turley.

“This is our first step,” she said. “Regarding environmental justice, we take that very seriously. This is the first time we have ever planned a separate meeting to sit down and really focus on environmental justice concerns.”

Among the concerns voiced by residents are poor communities taking trash from wealthier communities in states like Massachusetts, negative impacts on the North Country tourism economy, carbon emissions from hauling trash long distance to places like Dalton, PFAS from landfills entering the human body, odors and noise experienced by abutters, diminished property values, deforestation and its impact on the carbon footprint, impacts from the destruction of wetlands and their water-filtering capacity on downstream communities, and one region “bearing the brunt” of New Hampshire’s lack of solid waste management planning.

Although the public comment period ends July 3, Turley said meaningful environmental justice engagement will continue throughout the process.

She said that if the state approves all of its permit applications, it does not necessarily follow that UCACE will grant its permit.

### Pre-Meeting Rally

The meeting and a pre-meeting rally of opponents outside the town hall drew members of environmental groups, elected officials, and candidates for office from across New Hampshire.

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