

Madison County tables vote on landfill lease agreement

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On Dec. 19, the Madison County Board of Supervisors tabled three resolutions related to the Madison County Landfill after receiving input from several residents during a public hearing. (Submitted)

MADISON COUNTY — Following a public hearing on Tuesday, Dec. 19, the Madison County Board of Supervisors tabled three resolutions related to a proposed public-private partnership intended to address concerns about the financial sustainability of the Madison County Solid Waste Management System.

Madison County has proposed awarding an operations, maintenance, and lease agreement to New England Waste Services of N.Y., Inc. (NEWSNY), a wholly-owned subsidiary of Casella Waste

Systems.

Per the proposed agreement, the county would continue to own its landfill and related solid waste facilities, and NEWSNY would lease the land and run day-to-day operations. The county would be involved in any future changes to the landfill operations and would retain the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC) permit.

“Madison County will continue to look at what is best for the future of our landfill, our residents and our employees,” county officials said in a statement on the Madison County Solid Waste website. “The board of supervisors has decided to adjourn for the year of 2023 and continue evaluating the decision before them. The next board meeting is scheduled for January 2, 2024, [and] the topic of the landfill will not be on the agenda.”

In addition to postponing a vote on the operations, maintenance, and lease agreement, the board also tabled a resolution to adopt a local law to repeal a provision of an existing local law that states “Solid waste generated outside the county will not be accepted at the county landfill or at any other facility located in the county, except pursuant to approval by the board of supervisors.”

The third resolution tabled by the board is to authorize a declaration that the operations, maintenance, and lease agreement and the local law amendment would have no significant impact on the environment.

On Dec. 21, Madison County Solid Waste & Recycling Committee Chair Jim Cunningham said he did not endorse the resolutions because they had not been approved by the solid waste committee before being presented to the board of supervisors for a vote.

“All three resolutions were not moved,” he said, “It’s typical for the chairs of each committee to move resolutions that come out of committee meetings. If a chair does not move a resolution, another supervisor can. I did not move the resolutions.”

The board decided to table the resolutions after a public hearing on the proposed public-private partnership that drew “an overflowing number of concerned citizens,” according to Cunningham, who also reported that the overwhelming sentiment expressed by the public was that the county should slow its evaluation process down to find the best solution.

In a correspondence provided to the board at the public hearing, former Madison County Department of Solid Waste and Sanitation director James Zecca shared his concerns about the proposed partnership and stated that he had been contacted by former county supervisors, solid waste committee members, and other citizens who also have concerns.

In his remarks, Zecca referred to a recent study conducted by Cornerstone Engineering and Geology, PLLC on the long-term sustainability of the current landfill operations.

Zecca stated that the summary of the study underscores the irreplaceable value of Madison County's landfill.

"It raises a pertinent question: why consider relinquishing this invaluable asset to a private entity that stands to profit substantially from the landfill space allocated by previous Board of Supervisors decisions to serve the communities of Madison County?" he said. "Alternative avenues exist for the county to obtain necessary tonnage and funds through direct arrangements with other municipalities or brokers. This approach could effectively financially stabilize operations for the long term. Moreover, reversion to standard operations in the future wouldn't necessitate the drastic reduction of the landfill's service life from over 100 years to a mere 25 years or less, as proposed in the form [of] a 25-year contract with Casella Waste Systems. While acknowledging the necessity of using some space for out-of-county waste, the proposed 25-year contract allocating 75 years' worth of space appears disproportionate to the county's needs and the value of this resource, as clearly articulated in the Cornerstone report and Casella's proposal."

Zecca also shared with the board several news stories reporting on regulation violations and other issues associated with Casella Waste Systems operations in other counties in New York and New England.

On Dec. 21, Cunningham remarked that Tuesday's meeting was a good example of the public's ability to impact government actions with their voices.

"I agree with spending sufficient time to find the best solution for Madison County for this enormous and important decision," he said. "I commend the chairman of the Madison County Board of Supervisors, John Becker, for his support of the past two years of this ongoing costly evaluation process, and Amy Miller, the director of the Madison County Solid Waste division, for a tremendous effort to find the best solution for the residents of Madison County."

According to Cunningham, the solid waste and recycling committee is evaluating five options for the county's solid waste program, and the evaluations will continue into 2024.

Background

Located at 6802 Buyea Rd., Canastota, the Madison County Landfill site also includes an administrative main office, a scale house, and an ARC Recycling Center for haulers.

Additionally, the county solid waste department oversees four transfer stations — Canastota, Cazenovia, Hamilton, and Sullivan — where residents can dispose of their household garbage and recycling if they do not use a private hauler.

For the last two years, the county has been evaluating options to stabilize the high costs of handling the 60,000 tons of garbage its landfill is permitted to receive a year.

According to the Madison County Solid Waste’s “Long Term Planning” webpage, the county is concerned about the financial viability of its current operations because it does not want ever-increasing disposal fees to financially burden the community.

The solid waste department does not receive revenue from taxes; instead, it is run as an enterprise fund and is funded by residential and commercial waste disposal fees that must be sufficient to support the entirety of the solid waste management system, including landfill operations, recycling, transfer stations, special programs, capital expenses, and future liabilities.

The main challenge, according to the county, is the small scale of its operations and its inability to achieve sufficient economies of scale.

Although the landfill has many years of remaining life in terms of capacity, the facility is among the smallest operating landfills in New York State. Despite its size, it is subject to the same regulations as much larger landfills and the equipment needs are similar. The same is true for the transfer stations and material recovery facility, which processes recyclables.

“In other words, the amount of waste that is generated within Madison County is not enough to financially sustain operations without increasing costs significantly to residents and businesses,” the Long Term Planning page states.

The page also says that the costs of operating the solid waste system have increased substantially in recent years, and additional costs are anticipated in the next five years due to New York State’s regulatory trajectory.

“People produce approximately 4.5 pounds of solid waste per day with [a] NYSDEC recommendation to reduce that amount to less than a pound per person per day utilizing effective recycling methods,” said Cunningham. “Many landfills have been closed around the state, which has placed enormous pressure on municipalities to manage the solid waste we all produce. . . . The solutions for managing an ever-growing volume of solid waste are complicated by increased regulations upon municipalities.”

In 2021, the Madison County Board of Supervisors passed a resolution to hire Cornerstone to assess the current county landfill operations and then evaluate alternatives that may improve the long-term financial sustainability of the solid waste department.

The firm's final report was released in February 2023 and is available on the county website.

The report indicates that current waste disposal fees are not sufficiently covering the costs of operations, capital expenses, and the long-term management of the landfill. If changes are not made to the system, waste disposal fees will need to increase to fully fund the program's annual costs, as well as the future responsibilities of landfill closure and post-closure monitoring.

The Cornerstone study evaluated the following three alternatives: maintaining the status quo with the implementation of efficiency measures, such as closing some of the transfer stations and beginning to charge a fee for recyclables; entering a public-private partnership for the operation and maintenance of the landfill; and closing the landfill and constructing a transfer station to send waste elsewhere.

Based on its evaluation, Cornerstone recommended that the county prepare a request for proposals (RFP) for a public-private partnership to operate the county's solid waste program.

In addition to the alternatives evaluated by Cornerstone, Madison County has also explored an intermunicipal agreement with Onondaga County Resource Recovery Agency, as well as the option of continuing to operate the landfill by accepting sufficient volumes of out-of-county waste to achieve profitability and long-term sustainability.

"Neighboring Onondaga County incinerates the majority of the solid waste produced in the county," said Cunningham. "The incineration process still requires a landfill to dispose of the ash produced in Onondaga County, which Madison County takes a portion of into our landfill. The impact of Micron will increase solid waste production; thus, Onondaga County has approached Madison County to work together."

According to the "Public-Private Partnership Q&A" on the county's website, the board of supervisors determined that a public-private partnership is "an advantageous, cost-effective alternative" that would provide "the best opportunity to achieve long-term financial stability and sustainability."

There are currently five other landfills in New York State that are run with a public-private partnership.

To continue evaluating that option, the board issued an RFP in August 2023, reviewed the two qualified submissions, and selected NEWSNY as its preferred partner.

For more information on the alternatives considered by the board of supervisors and details on what a NEWSNY partnership would mean for county residents and businesses, visit the Public-Private Partnership Q&A page at madisoncounty.ny.gov.

Tags: Casella Waste Systems Cornerstone Engineering and Geology Inc. landfill
Madison County Board of Supervisors Madison County Landfill Madison County Solid Waste
Madison County Solid Waste & Recycling Committee Chair Jim Cunningham
Madison County Solid Waste Management System New England Waste Services of N.Y.