



Public hearing on proposed Dalton landfill draws a crowd in opposition

By **Amanda Gokee** - July 15, 2021



Dozens gathered at White Mountains Regional High School to protest a proposal for a Casella landfill near Forest Lake State Park in Dalton. (Amanda Gokee | New Hampshire Bulletin)

They came wearing black.

About a hundred people gathered at White Mountains Regional High School in Whitefield on Wednesday in opposition to a landfill proposed for a site near Forest Lake State Park in Dalton.

The rally outside the school's gym was held in advance of a public hearing hosted by the Department of Environmental Services for public comment on a wetlands permit that Casella Waste Systems needs to move forward with the landfill.

"Dump the Dalton dump," the anti-landfill group chanted outside, standing in the shadow of the high school entrance.

While many in the crowd had graying hair and beards, Berkley Parenteau was among the youngest in attendance.

Berkley, 12, had come to the rally and public hearing with her grandmother, Peg Parenteau. She lives in Massachusetts, but her grandmother lives in Whitefield and the family spends time on an unbuildable parcel they own next to the lake.

"We're worried about the animals and the plants, not just the lake, but the area around it and the air," said Berkley, who had prepared a speech for the public hearing.

"I'm going to talk about how not only the water is important to save, but the land around it," she said.



"You could actually be helping your grandchildren," another attendee told her.

Wednesday's hearing focused on 17 acres of wetlands that would be filled in if construction is approved. The state requires a permit for any project impacting more than an acre of wetlands.

The permit process started with Casella's application in 2020, and, in the two years since, the project has become the center of [a statewide debate over environmental protections](#) for state parks and the future of waste management in New Hampshire. During the recent legislative session, attempts to ban a landfill from being sited within two miles of a state park were ultimately defeated. The ban would have prevented Casella from building a landfill in Dalton.

Sixty-five people had signed up to speak in person at the hearing on Wednesday, and four had signed up to speak remotely. The public hearing was a hybrid event with people attending both physically and virtually.

Opponents of the landfill were hopeful that the impact to wetlands would be key in preventing the project from moving forward.

"The wetlands is a high-level opportunity for this thing to get derailed," said Tom Tower, who is on the board of directors for the North Country Alliance for Balanced Change, one of the organizations that has been vocal in opposing the landfill.

Tower took Wednesday as a sign that the anti-landfill movement is growing – a lot. He said the hearing on Wednesday could build on that momentum.

"This is gargantuan what they're asking to do, to put a dump there," he said.

"I liken this now to Northern Pass, too, and we're going to need everybody to step up and speak out about how outrageous this is," Tower said.

He wasn't the only one to make the comparison. New Hampshire Rep. Edith Tucker, a Randolph Democrat, spoke in opposition to the landfill project, comparing it to the failed proposal to run 192 miles of new power lines from Canada through the North Country, which sparked significant opposition.

"This project would permanently impact seven times more wetlands than the proposed Northern Pass," Tucker said.

She also challenged Casella's claim that the proposed landfill would not impact groundwater flows.

"You can't just make that assertion, you must be required to prove it," she said.

Phil Trowbridge of the Department of Environmental Services called the public hearing a listening session and said the department has already received many written comments on the permit.

The state considers four broad areas when deciding whether to approve a wetlands permit: direct impacts to the wetland itself, the water quality of the wetland, habitat loss, and flood storage.

"Wetlands are very important for slowing down floodwaters and preventing peak flows that get too high in rivers," Trowbridge said. "Loss of wetlands is also a loss of flood storage."

In an interview prior to the hearing, Trowbridge said the wetland regulations the state follows are complex. For the permit to be granted, it must satisfy all of the state's regulations.



State Rep. Edith Tucker, a Randolph Democrat, talks with Phil Trowbridge of the Department of Environmental Services during a public hearing on Wednesday. (Amanda Gokee | New Hampshire Bulletin)

"There's not a lot of discretion," he said. "We have very specific rules and laws that we need to follow, and we look at those carefully and we verify that a proposal does or does not meet those criteria."

He pointed to 200 pages of regulations the state will use to evaluate the permit.

"One of the functions and values of a wetland is to infiltrate groundwater or infiltrate water into the ground. So you know a wetland will gather up, it'll pond there, and then it will sink into the ground and restore groundwater levels. And so, you know when you lose wetlands, you lose some of those functions," Trowbridge said.

The public hearing began with a 20-minute presentation about the proposal given by Joe Gay, a Casella engineer. He said that of the four sites the company had considered, the Dalton site was preferable in part because it is in an industrial area of the town. Gay showed a slide with a large map and pointed to the Pine Tree power plant.

People in the crowd scoffed.

"Where's Forest Lake?" shouted someone from the audience.

According to Gay, permitting for this type of project usually takes 10 years. Casella began looking for a suitable site in 2017, anticipating the closure of other dumps around 2027. He said the company began drilling in 2018 to do subsurface investigation and determine groundwater flow.

Gay pointed to a ridgeline between Forest Lake and the proposed site.

"There's a groundwater and surface water divide here," he said. He also pointed to the double-lined containment system that would be placed underneath the landfill.

"This landfill will not have an impact on the groundwater and surface water," he said. Many members in the audience spoke out in disbelief.

"Please hold your remarks," Trowbridge said, and the crowd quieted.

Gay presented several mitigation proposals that would be undertaken, including one focused on the Alder Brook drainage. Casella asked the Dalton Conservation Commission to partner with the company on the project, but the commission declined. Casella would also pay the Department of Environmental Services \$3.3 million for conservation efforts in other parts of the state.



Pam Ladds of Vermont said the anti-landfill group wore black to symbolize the gravity of the situation. (Amanda Gokee | New Hampshire Bulletin)

One prominent proponent of the landfill was absent from Wednesday's hearing. Doug Ingerson is the landowner who is hoping to sell his 1,900-acre parcel to Casella for the landfill. He was one of the first who signed up to speak in advance of the event but was absent when his name was called.

Opponents of the landfill pointed out that the state park, which includes a lake, is only 190 feet from the edge of the landfill. And they raised concerns about impacts to the water quality, which Casella has refuted. But opponents point to the nearby Bethlehem landfill, where 154,000 gallons of leachate recently leaked from a Casella landfill in one of the largest spills in the state.



Pam Ladds, a Vermont resident who opposes the permit, said the anti-landfill group wore black to symbolize the gravity of the situation and the death the project could bring with it. She learned how destructive a Casella landfill could be, she said, from her experience living near Lake Memphremagog.

“We know the harms you endure. We see the damage,” she said, adding that the dump in her community is as tall as the Eiffel Tower and residents refer to it as Mount Trashmore. Ladds hopes Dalton can avoid the same fate.

“We want to help anywhere else not make the same mistakes,” she said.

Landowners and residents spoke against the proposal, including Marsha Stewart, a Whitefield homeowner whose son lives in Littleton, where he is raising two sons of his own.

“They enjoy swimming and playing at Forest Lake State Park like their father has for over 35 years,” she said. “They should be able to go there and enjoy it.”

“Our beautiful scenery, our pristine lakes, and our quiet are our North Country heritage, and they should be protected for the enjoyment of tourists and residents alike,” Stewart said.

“Isn’t that why we pay our taxes to the state of New Hampshire? To protect us from huge, wealthy corporations from which we cannot protect ourselves,” she said. She urged the state to deny the permit.

The state will accept written public comment for another 30 days and will have 45 days after the written comment period ends to make a decision about whether to grant the permit.

Berkley Parenteau, 12, attended the rally and public hearing with her grandmother, Peg Parenteau. (Amanda Gokee | New Hampshire Bulletin)

Amanda Gokee

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