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Residents Question Who Is Behind Recent Landfill Survey

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Casella Waste Systems has filed another lawsuit against New Hampshire Department of Environmental Services Commissioner Robert Scott, the latest contesting the state's determination that its Stage VI landfill expansion in Bethlehem does not meet "the substantial public benefit" requirement under state law. (File photo by Robert Blechl)

A month after a landfill-related phone survey went out to Bethlehem residents and some from neighboring towns, representatives for Casella Waste Systems, which runs the NCES landfill in Bethlehem, have not said if their company is behind it, and if so, what was the purpose of the survey and what they intend to do with the results.

In December, several Bethlehem residents posted about the solid waste survey on the town's public Facebook page.

Among those receiving a call was Bethlehem resident Julie Seely, who has long voiced concerns about continued landfill expansion in Bethlehem.

The survey left her and others wondering if Casella, which is proposing a new landfill in Dalton, is taking another look at trying to expand its existing landfill in Bethlehem.

"I think it's rather astonishing that they would start out again in 2022 after the whole debacle with the 2018 so-called survey," Seely said.

The 2018 survey was full of "exaggerations and omissions" and then, in late 2022, a survey with similar questions tilted toward support of a landfill in the region was put out, she said.

"I think it's pretty funny, assuming it's Casella," said Seely. "That's a pretty safe bet there."

The surveyor said she was calling from VRI Research in Nevada but, when asked, didn't know or didn't want to say on whose behalf she was calling, said Seely.

The survey, she said, involved push poll questions, which asked respondents to rank their responses, such as if a resident knew that if modern landfills used "sophisticated design" and "engineering" would that make them more or less likely to support one in the North Country.

In posting about the call in December, Seely said there was no mention in the survey of the 154,000-gallon leachate spill at NCS that was the largest leachate spill in New Hampshire history.

In speaking with other residents, she said the calls received in December are known to have gone out to residents with prefix numbers that include 869, 444, and 823.

Residents on the Littleton public Facebook group, including Scott Fullam, also posted about receiving a survey.

Debi Warner, of Littleton, posted about receiving a survey call that she said starts "with simple questions about attitude toward the dump" before asking questions "that would sway you."

On Thursday evening, Margaret Gale, of Bethlehem, said she took a call.

“Fairly early, it became clear that it wasn’t an objective survey,” she said. “The way they were asking the questions, it was clearly slanted toward landfills and very obviously in favor of Casella in the community.”

Gale said she asked the surveyor if Casella was paying for the questions and was told by the surveyor that she didn’t know.

Questions

Residents were asked how much they’ve read or heard about issues surrounding landfills (a lot, some, not much, nothing at all), how familiar they are with the landfill in Bethlehem that handles regional waste from homes and small businesses, and if they strongly, somewhat support or oppose having a solid waste landfill in the region, said Seely, who, along with other residents, took notes.

Questions, she said, included:

“In Bethlehem where there is currently a landfill the town receives hundreds of thousands of dollars per year for the local community from the landfill. Without it, this money would need to be replaced and would ultimately result in higher property taxes. Would that make you much more likely, somewhat more likely, somewhat less likely, or much less likely to support it?”

“The regional landfill in Bethlehem produces hundreds of thousands of dollars, of which a portion is used to help provide children with great schools. Without it, the community would have to fund schools by raising taxes on the elderly, families and small business owners. Other communities could benefit from that funding if they had a landfill. Would that make you much more likely, somewhat more likely, somewhat less likely, or much less likely to support it?”

“Residents of Bethlehem have free trash pick-up at their homes, which also saves them over \$340,000 every year. They do not have to drive their trash to a transfer station. Other communities could get the same type of benefit if they had a landfill. Would that make you much more likely, somewhat more likely, somewhat less likely, or much less likely to support it?”

“Since many elderly people have difficulty transferring their trash to waste disposal stations, having curbside pickup of trash is a critical service. Would that make you much more likely, somewhat more likely, somewhat less likely, or much less likely to support it?”

“Now that you have heard more information, do you support or oppose having a solid waste landfill in our region? Strongly or somewhat?”

“How much have you seen, read or heard about the well-funded out-of-state special interest groups pushing to close down local solid waste landfills in New Hampshire? Nothing at all, not much, some, or a lot?”

“Some New Hampshire state legislators and other elected officials want to eliminate the ability of solid waste landfills from accepting new or additional trash. Do you support or oppose eliminating the ability of local solid waste landfills to accept new or additional trash? Strongly or somewhat?”

Residents were also asked if they believe the trash produced in New Hampshire is the responsibility of the state or if the state and its residents should pay to transport it to another state, said Seely.

In addition, they were asked personal questions, such as year born, education level, political leanings, and how long they lived in the area, she said.

No Response

On the morning of Friday, Jan. 13, The Caledonian-Record reached out to Casella spokesman Jeff Weld with emailed questions, as well as with a follow-up voicemail.

Weld was asked if Casella or any affiliate of Casella contracted with VRI for a telephone survey; if so, what is the purpose of that survey and would the company be willing to share the results and what does it intend to do with the results; who specifically are the well-funded special interest groups trying to close down landfills; will any part of the survey be used to encourage the state to allow Stage VI expansion at NCES and/or support another expansion on the 123 acres Casella owns; and, following the survey, does Casella or any of its residential supporters intend to place any petitioned articles on a future Bethlehem town meeting warrant.

In 2012, Casella entered into a settlement agreement with the town of Bethlehem in which it agreed to not buy new property for landfill expansion if residents would agree to give the company 10 additional acres that would cap the town’s total landfill district at 61 acres and would close the landfill in about 2020.

Voters approved the settlement by a 2-1 margin.

In December 2015, the company bought 123 acres beside the landfill that it soon proposed as a site for expansion.

In 2017 and 2018, voters rejected a petitioned article to amend Bethlehem's zoning ordinance by adding 100 acres to the 61-acre landfill district to give the NCES landfill another 20 years of capacity.

Currently, NCES is projected to close in about 2026, although a hearing officer with the New Hampshire Waste Management Council concluded that the previously approved Stage VI expansion does not meet the required "substantial public benefit" requirement because it would be operating for most of its life during a time when there is no capacity need in New Hampshire.

Casella has contested that finding, arguing, through its attorneys, that New Hampshire's solid waste management statute is discriminatory against out-of-state waste importers.

The issue, which has resulted in Casella asking the WMC for a rehearing and in a lawsuit filed by the company against state Department of Environmental Services Commissioner Robert Scott, remains pending.

Weld was asked if Casella will use the survey results to support a Stage VI expansion and/or expansion on the 123 acres, and if so, what the company says to those residents who contend it is not honoring its settlement with Bethlehem, in which the company signed an agreement not to buy new land for expansion and not seek expansion outside of the 61 acres.

He did not respond to the emailed questions or the voicemail by press time Thursday.

Before reaching out to Weld on Jan. 13, The Caledonian-Record emailed former Casella spokesman Joe Fusco and was told, during a follow-up phone call to the Casella office in Rutland, Vt., that Fusco had retired.

Fusco's automated email reply read:

"Hey, [Your Name Here]:

Thanks for your note. I am no longer in the office, and will not be checking this email account until sometime in Spring 2023. There is the significant and persistent risk you will never receive a response.

If you are a reporter, please note: from this point forward, direct all inquiries to Jeff Weld, Director of Communications, at jeff.weld@casella.com.

If you and I are tight, then you know the other ways to get in touch with me if something is what we would both consider 'urgent.' However, thou art walking on the thinnest of ice.

Thank you!

Joe Fusco"

Robert Blechl