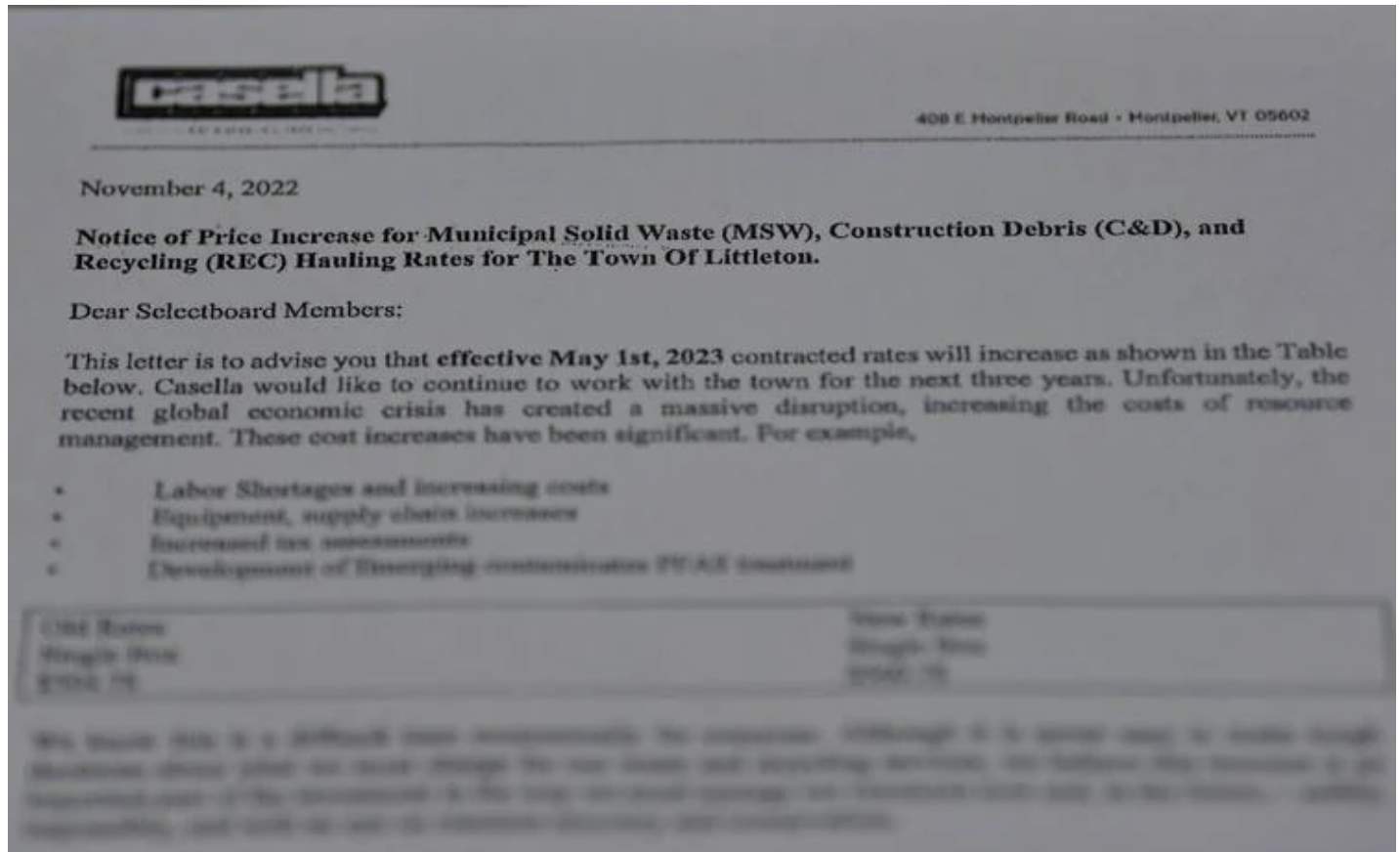


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Town Officials, Residents React To Casella's Hauling Rate Increases

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Casella Waste Systems has sent letter to local towns informing them that their municipal solid waste hauling rates will increase beginning May 1. The letter to Littleton, pictured here, shows that the current rate of \$304.78 for a single box will nearly double to \$560.78.

Some North Country towns are exploring other options for municipal solid waste hauling services after receiving notice from Casella Waste Systems that rates will increase substantially beginning May 1.

In Littleton, hauling rates will nearly double, and in Franconia, they will more than double.

Some local residents have called the increases “price gouging,” even amid an inflationary environment.

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An arch-opponent of Casella and its proposed Granite State Landfill in Dalton, Jon Swan, of Dalton, has filed a deceptive trade practices/price gouging complaint with the New Hampshire attorney general's office.

The Nov. 4 letters to towns in the Pemi-Baker Solid Waste District were sent a day after the New Hampshire Waste Management Council reaffirmed its previous decision concluding that the company's Stage VI expansion at its North Country Environmental Services landfill in Bethlehem lacks the "substantial public benefit" as required by the state's solid waste management statute.

The reason, said the council, is because Stage VI would be operating for most of its life when New Hampshire does not need the additional landfill capacity to meet its solid waste needs.

(Currently, the state projects that new landfill capacity is not needed until after 2034).

The council's Nov. 3 finding was remanded to the New Hampshire Department of Environmental Services, which had approved the Stage VI permit.

It's still uncertain whether that permit will be revoked — if so, the landfill in Bethlehem could stop operating several years before its 2026 expected close date — or if Casella's intended appeal of the council's finding to the New Hampshire Supreme Court will be successful.

In the Nov. 4 notice to the Littleton Select Board of the increase for municipal solid waste, construction debris and recycling hauling rates, Amber Vecchiarelli, territory sales representative for Casella, said the current rates of \$304.78 for a single box will increase to a new single-box rate of \$560.78.

Vecchiarelli cites "labor shortages and increasing costs," "equipment, supply chain increases," "increased tax assessments," and "development of emerging contaminants PFAS treatment."

"Casella would like to continue to work with the town for the next three years," she wrote.

"Unfortunately, the recent global economic crisis has created a massive disruption, increasing the costs of resource management."

The Franconia Select Board received an identical letter, save for the rate of increase, which shows its current single-box rate of \$229.45 will increase to \$476.45 on May 1.

Reaction

Not all local residents were convinced that Casella hauling rates need to be increased to the company's quoted levels, among them Eliot Wessler, of Whitefield, a retired economist, opponent of GSL, and former president of North Country Alliance for Balanced Change.

"Doubling the prices in some cases to their NCES customers sure looks like price gouging to me," he said Thursday. "With back-of-the-envelope calculations, it's very hard to justify. They cite a number of reasons why a price increase is necessary, but nothing adds up. We're in an inflationary environment, but a doubling of the price seems pretty crazy."

One motivation by the company might be that NCES's permitting is "going nowhere" and GSL's permitting "so far has been a disaster," he said.

"Casella appears to be in full panic that its failure to obtain permits to expand its NCES landfill in Bethlehem and its disastrous attempt to permit a new landfill (GSL) in Dalton is going to dry up New Hampshire as a cash cow for the company," said Wessler. "So Casella seems to be trying to pull a fast one on its New Hampshire customers. It has sent out form letters that it is going to dramatically increase the price for hauling trash from collection centers to landfills it operates. The form letters are largely unintelligible, which suggests that Casella thinks that its customers are just going to roll over and not explore other options. Or maybe Casella thinks that it can gaslight its customers (and, unfortunately, Governor Sununu, too) into thinking they really don't have any other options."

It's obvious to everyone who buys essentials, such as fuel and groceries, that it's an inflationary environment, but while the prices of many goods and services have been rising, prices in the last few months have generally been going up close to 10 percent per year, he said.

"But Casella's form letters are telling its customers that prices will skyrocket," said Wessler. "In the case of Franconia, the price will more than double. The form letter cites, without any explanation or evidence, four specific causal factors why it needs to double prices."

The last factor cited is the development of emerging contaminants PFAS treatment, but New Hampshire currently has no requirements for PFAS treatment, he said.

"If they're trying to charge New Hampshire customers for any costs they're incurring in Vermont or other states that is a horrible thing for a company that says we're here for the benefit of New Hampshire residents and communities," said Wessler.

The increased hauling rates that Casella is quoting do not include tipping fees and are just transportation costs, he said.

“The real comparison, I think, is not Casella’s quotes on transportation costs and anything that’s going on with AVRRDD [the Androscoggin Valley Regional Refuse Disposal District that runs the municipally owned landfill near Berlin], but rather what independent haulers would be willing to set for prices for these communities,” said Wessler.

With its rate increases, Casella runs the risk of prompting towns to look at other options, he said.

Casella

On Thursday morning, Casella spokesman Joe Fusco was asked if the company would be willing to show, in numbers, the increases in expenses incurred by the company and provide a formula that shows that the increases for towns, such as Littleton and Franconia, are justified; if the timing of the Nov. 4 letters has anything to do with the Nov. 3 council decision; if Casella expects to continue transporting waste to NCES in Bethlehem or to another landfill, and if the latter, where is that facility; and where specifically are the properties where assessments increased and by how much was the increase.

His full response was, “We always encourage our customers who have any questions about our services or our rate structure to reach out to us directly, as we are always happy to have a conversation with them. As for the Waste Management Council, we will be appealing the WMC hearing officer’s faulty decision on Monday, so the company is making no changes in response to it.”

Franconia

After Casella’s Nov. 4 letters, Swan reached out to a number of towns that received them and suggested they switch to AVRRDD.

On Thursday, Franconia Selectman Eric Meth said that’s what prompted him to encourage his board members, during a meeting several weeks ago, to look into other options, including AVRRDD.

Meth has since reached out to AVRRDD’s executive director, Sharon Gauthier, to inquire about rates, but as of Thursday had not received a response.

"I remember a couple of town meetings ago somebody had mentioned Mt. Carberry," said Meth. "I never thought about it before. Our trash can't go to Maine because they're not accepting out-of-state trash. It can't go to Vermont because it doesn't meet the regulations for recycling ... Just based on the rate and the lifespan of NCES, Mt. Carberry sounded like a viable option. We would like to see if this is a possibility."

On Thursday afternoon, Gauthier was asked if she has received inquiries in recent weeks from towns in northwestern New Hampshire, what disposal and hauling rates for towns wanting to make the switch could be, and how many more municipalities the Mt. Carberry landfill could accommodate.

"I can't comment on that at this point because I haven't received any specific request," she said. "I have not talked with anybody specifically. I really can't comment."

Littleton

In Littleton, town manager Jim Gleason noted the "pretty significant increase," which will have the largest impact on the transfer station and the wastewater treatment plant from which sludge is hauled.

For the transfer station hauling rates, he called a 2022 rate of \$45,000 to an increased rate of \$73,000 in 2023 "not quite a doubling, but close."

In an email to town officials, Littleton Transfer Station Manager Steve Bean called it an "unprecedented increase" and said as May 2023 nears he will reach out to local haulers to see if they can move Littleton's containers and what the cost might be.

To accommodate the increases, possible increases in transfer station fees are being looked at, said Gleason.

As for the Littleton Select Board right now agreeing to the cost increases, Gleason said the town really doesn't have a choice.

"We are already under contract through Pemi-Baker with 20-some entities," he said. "But we will check between now and then with some other entities because I think the agreement is through May of 2023, so that may give us an opportunity. But to be very honest, what's happened with die:

costs and other costs, that's an impact to [Casella]. It's definitely impacting every other hauler. It's just one of those things we have to budget for and look at our fee schedule and see if there shouldn't be some adjustments to offset some of those costs."

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