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Town succeeds in keeping company out

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ROCKINGHAM, Vt. — While many New England communities have fought to keep Casella Waste Systems’ operations under control, residents in this town succeeded in keeping the Rutland-based company out of their neighborhood.

The Rutland Herald reported on Jan. 16 that Casella withdrew its proposal to make a 20-acre landfill on the banks of the Connecticut River.

“The withdrawal of the proposal for the…site came at the end of a somewhat contentious public meeting during which the benefits [James Bohlig, Casella’s president and chief operating officer] outlined were largely overwhelmed by residents’ concerns,” the paper reported.

In recent interviews with the Southbridge Evening News, the president of the organization that fought to prevent Casella from operating a landfill in Rockingham, as well as an environmental advocate for the group, reflected on the circumstances that led a small number of concerned citizens to win what some considered to be “a war” with the multi-million dollar company.

“We wanted to get a public vote,” said Margaret Perry, president of the Friends and Neighbors of Missing Link Road Association. “But it didn’t even get that far.”

About 30 public hearings on Casella’s intent to make a 20-acre landfill in the rural town of 5,000 people culminated with the Jan. 16 public hearing, during which Bohlig said his company would not pursue the matter.

“For the time being, we have withdrawn the proposal,” said Joseph Fusco, Casella’s vice president. “But it’s extremely premature to rule anything in or out, while exploring other properties.”

Fusco said that while Casella has not completely ruled out that particular site, it is less likely that a landfill will end up there than in other parts of town.

“[The association’s] effort was to keep the landfill away from the river,” Perry said. “With all the land we have in this country, we don’t need to site landfills near flowing bodies of water.”

Perry said that the riverbanks erode during times of heavy rainfall.

Perry endeavored to keep a landfill away from the river in February 2003, after she received a phone call from a realtor who said he needed to appraise her house on Missing Link Road.

“I asked him what was going on, and he said he was doing research because all the properties on my road were going to be purchased,” Perry said.

Perry talked to neighbors, who were also in a state of shock. Soon, they learned that one of their neighbors, Thornton Lillie, a town selectman, was planning to sell his land to a waste management company, for the purpose of operating a landfill.

Perry emphasized that “Lillie approached [Casella]; they didn’t come here looking.”

About 10 neighborhood families joined together to devise strategies to keep the landfill out. They ended up forming an LLC, for the purpose of buying some 30 acres of land, which would have made it difficult for Casella to expand the landfill.

“We locked up the land,” Perry said. “We tried not to leave any stones unturned.”

The association got help from the Toxics Action Center (TAC), a New England environmental advocacy group that focuses on community organization.

“It was just like war, getting Casella not to do this,” said Alyssa Schuren, the center’s Vermont director.

To Casella’s credit, Perry said, the company was “cooperative” throughout the year.

“I’m sure they didn’t tell us some things,” Perry said, adding that the company’s first meeting with Rockingham’s Board of Selectmen was held in executive session. “But that’s the way business is done.

“In our meetings with them, they were courteous,” she added.

Perry is unsure of what ultimately led Bohlig to withdraw his company’s proposal.

“Some of it may have been the public outcry, some may have been the river,” she said. “The final factor could have been the fact that they wouldn’t have been able to expand the landfill as much as they would have liked.”

Fusco said Casella has withdrawn its interest in the town for the time being.

“Overall, our responsibility is to find the best site,” he said.

Schuren believes that Rockingham’s location, about 100 miles away from Casella’s headquarters, is part of the reason.

“It seems to be that Casella is a better neighbor in Vermont than in any other state. This is where they have to live,” she said.

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