

Bethlehem

Opponents Trash Landfill Expansion Plans

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Editor's Note: This story is part one of a two-part series.

In a marathon, five-hour public hearing Tuesday, the first in the existence of the growing Trudeau Road landfill footprint, about one-third of the 100-plus residents attending trashed the company's expansion plans as "an environmental disaster" and a "long-term liability that is ruining the town."

The hearing, conducted by the Waste Management Division staff of the New Hampshire Department of Environmental Services, was to take input on substantive and technical issues that might alter the permit process for the requested 6.5-acre expansion.

Already a 25.2-acre footprint of trash piled as high as 90 feet above ground level resides on the site, once a small-time, local, unlined dump operated by Harold Brown.

Over time the parcel and adjoining

acreage has been bought out by ever larger owners, culminating in the purchase by Casella Waste Systems of Rutland.

By the time of this purchase, the landfill was closing out its initial 18-acre Stage I footprint and beginning its 7.2-acre Stage II expansion. With the last of these cells expected to be filled by September, NCES, a wholly-owned subsidiary of Casella's, has filed for the 6.5-acre expansion to the southeast side of the existing trash pile.

Some 650,000 to 850,000 tons of trash would be dumped in the double-lined facility, with an expected fill life of 4½ years at an estimated annual dumping rate of about 120,000 tons annually.

Moderator Richard Reed, a compliance officer with the state's waste management division, said the company would like a construction permit by early summer.

He told the audience that while the company's permit application was judged

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to be complete, it had not been reviewed as to adequacy.

One area already needing more review was the "public benefit" section of the application and Reed said gas migration from the capped pile, financial issues of the operator, water and air quality and site suitability would be other issues looked at after the input of residents at the hearing.

In a prepared handout by the agency it was explained that the New Hampshire attorney general's office said the controlling legal authority on the expansion was a Grafton Superior Court finding last March (1999) that municipal approvals of the expansion did not contain "real limitations of the proposed landfill" beyond the 10- and 41-acre landfill sites set aside in original 1976 zoning and planning board documents.

"The proposed Stage III development falls within the 10- and 41-acre parcels," read the opinion.

This disclaimer goes to the heart of repeated town meeting votes (five since 1992) that there be no further landfill expansion. In that time 66 percent supported the "no expansion votes" (2,128 votes) to the 33 percent supporting landfill expansion (1,079 votes).

Preceding the public hearing, NCES officials provided a 22-minute overview of the landfill's construction, operation and monitoring and continuing liabilities followed by a spirited question/answer period.

Using "best available technology" the landfill is engineered over an impermeable layer of glacial till (blue clay or bentonite) with a 60 mil high density polyeth-

ylene sheeting placed at the base as the secondary liner.

Engineered into this liner is a leachate collection system which drains off liquids from the disintegrating pile for treatment at waste water treatment plants elsewhere.

This liner/collection system is buffered from another HDPE plastic liner — the primary liner system — by another layer of soil and the leachate collection system is duplicated.

Once filled, a cell is covered by several layers of soil and geotechnical membranes and a gas collection system before a low-density polyethylene sheet covers the entire pile and it is finished off with soil and vegetation.

Asked to provide an estimate of the manufacturer's guarantee on the liner, Larry Lackey, the NCES manager of oper-

ations said "there is no guarantee."

Stan Harrison, a local opponent, characterized it differently, saying, "It's not a question of if the liner's going to fail, it's a question of when."

The town then is left with an environmental time bomb located over an acknowledged aquifer and a seep that leads directly to the Ammonoosuc River, about 1,100 feet distant, said Harrison.

It was discoloration of the water in this seep that initially led to concern that the benign, community dump may not be so innocuous after all.

Harrison's own "public benefit calculation" assumed about \$18 million in dumping benefits for the 27 or so local communities using the landfill but a potential Superfund site of liabilities when the liner system is breached.