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Bethelhem Reduces Tax Rate, Awarded \$750K For Transfer Station

Resident's Continued Push For Landfill Expansion Talks Creates Tension

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The New Hampshire House of Representatives last week removed language in the upcoming state budget that sought to override local control when it comes to expanding major landfills, such as the NCES landfill in Bethlehem, pictured here. (Photo contributed by NHDES)

After the Bethlehem Select Board voted against the idea on Oct. 20, a Casella Waste Systems supporter continues to push the board to open up landfill expansion talks with Casella, prompting one resident to dub it “groundhog day.”

The Trudeau Road landfill is expected to close after 2026 — or earlier if the state determines it has already reached capacity or is nearing it — and the town will have to build its own transfer station and staff it, which will come with costs, though no one yet knows exactly how much.

On Monday, Richard Ubaldo a former selectman and Casella advocate, spoke before the board and asked several questions he read from his phone in regard to the transfer station and hard cost numbers.

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The station — which the town previously estimated at about \$1 million to build and which in the last few days was awarded \$750,000 in federal funding — will go to a discussion with updates during the select board’s next meeting on Dec. 1, said Nancy Strand, chair of the board.

“Plans from a few years ago are now in revision and part of that revision is to reduce the cost,” she said. “The footprint will be a little smaller.”

Ubaldo asked about costs for employees, insurance, and operations. Town officials said all station expenses will begin in 2027 and it will be more appropriate to discuss them in 2026 when numbers become known.

“It’s my understanding that both school budgets are going up,” said Ubaldo. “I know ... this is not your purview, but it is your purview when it comes to creating taxes.”

“The school transmitted 42 cents less for this tax rate setting,” said town administrator Mary Moritz.

“Can I just finish?” Ubaldo said in the middle of Moritz’s comment. “I know, but I’m just saying that the school budgets are going to be going up so they’re going to have an effect on our taxes, and even though you guys are not responsible for the school budgets and what it comes to, it does reflect on our taxes.”

“Groundhog day, again,” said resident Richard Southwell. “I really get a little bit huffy when we start going to the Select Board about what’s happening with the school budget, and I think you guys have been incredibly polite on that. But at the end of the day, your portfolio, your job description, what you were put in those seats to do, is to run this town and the town’s finances, not the schools.”

The schools and town have separate budgets and are separate on purpose, said Southwell.

“You guys are not responsible for subsidizing the school budget,” said Southwell. “If you have concerns about your overall tax bill then you should go to the meeting that generates two-thirds of your taxes, which is the school budget. This is the town budget. It’s about a third, and you guys run on a pretty good shoestring.”

Selectman Mike Bruno agreed, and said if all of those who attended the town deliberative session attended the school meetings, there would be a different outcome at the school level.

Toward the end of Monday’s meeting, board members set a new tax rate of \$16.19 per \$1,000 of assessed valuation, which is 99 cents below last year’s rate.

To set the rate, the board voted unanimously to use \$700,000 from the undesignated fund balance, which leaves \$1.2 million left in fund balance.

A recent auction of town property in the amount of \$660,000 will create more revenue for the town, said board members.

Nov. 10 Landfill Talk Tensions

During the board's previous meeting on Nov. 10, Ubaldo, who also posed questions, said he wanted to correct previous statements made by residents, including about contaminants such as PFOAS showing up in test wells at Casella's NCES landfill on Trudeau Road.

He directed residents to the website of the New Hampshire Department of Environmental Services (DES). There, he said, they can see the data and decide for themselves.

Ubaldo then addressed what he called "the voting issue."

In 2017 and 2018, the town voted against landfill expansion, following multiple town votes against expansion in previous decades and a vote in 2012 that gave Casella 10 more acres to expand on the condition agreed to by Casella that the landfill would then close thereafter.

Because of the 2012 settlement agreement, any new negotiations would have to be initiated by the select board, for which Ubaldo in recent months has been pushing.

"I know the town has voted several times," said Ubaldo. "But it's America. We get to vote every year on something."

"Just as you stood up and said your peace, I've heard other people stand up and say their peace," said Strand. "Is there any room for disagreement on the DES statistics that your citing from, their website? Because obviously there's another side to this or there wouldn't be people on a different podium saying different than you. And they are just as convinced they're correct as what I think you're saying. Would you agree with me?"

"I would agree with you," said Ubaldo.

At least twice before, the board has listened to Ubaldo's request that they approach Casella for expansion talks, Strand said.

"We've discussed, we've voted, and I think we're ready to move on from that question," said Strand. "If you felt strongly that that should happen, you could create a petition warrant article. We've given you a way to vote like you're asking. But we felt, and we've voted on this, that it should not come from us."

“But why not?” asked Ubaldo.



Board members again explained their rationale for voting against opening up talks.

“It was voted on numerous times about expanding the landfill,” said Strand. “That’s why the board said we don’t want to bring this up again, from the Select Board, because the people have spoken numerous times. They did not want expansion.”

“And they can’t change their minds?” asked Ubaldo.

“They changed their minds for the settlement agreement because there was an end,” said Select Board member April Hibberd.

Ubaldo has stated a town transfer station would cost \$1.3 million.

The town previously applied for a federal U.S. Department of Agriculture grant to fund the station, but was denied.

“If we had gotten that money, would you be feeling differently about this?” asked Strand.

“No,” said Ubaldo.

“So don’t quote me the \$1.3 million, because you would feel the same whether we got the money or not,” said Strand.

Ubaldo said the \$1.3 million doesn’t include employees or other costs.

"It's always a delight to hear this rehashed again and again," said resident Chris Jensen. "One small item is Mt. Carberry [landfill near Berlin] and Trudeau Road both might have PFAS, but only Trudeau Road happens to be next to a river."

Southwell then took the podium to address Ubaldo's comments.

"The groundhog day," said Southwell. "I understand the concerns about the near-term finances and a new department and a cost ... We have a Congressional appropriation coming ... so the 1.3 is a worse-case scenario. We have \$300,000 in the kitty. The other end of this is that everybody who votes lives here and has to drink the water here and many of the people who live here own property and they have equity in that property and if something bad happens at the landfill, or DES decides the thresholds that they had for danger are suddenly lower and now we're in danger, home equity goes down and everybody takes a hit."

Most people's wealth is tied up in their home equity, he said.

"That seems like an enormous risk to be taking," said Southwell. "So I support the board. I'm grateful for the board to push this back on the voters."

If residents want a vote, they have an avenue to vote, through a petition, he said.

"Get 25 signatures, get it on there, get out, and do your best to get it done," said Southwell. "And if you have concerns about the board negotiating with Casella, you probably need to run a couple of candidates as well. I think there's degrees of negotiation. I think certain people would like a very easy negotiation with Casella were that to come to pass, but there's no requirement that they do that. You have to negotiate in good faith, which does not mean you don't negotiate hard, and so it may cost Casella a lot of money if they ever get that far, which I pray that they don't."

Casella spokesman Jeff Weld was asked on Tuesday if Casella was compensating Ubaldo to attend meetings and ask questions related to the landfill or if anyone from Casella was giving Ubaldo questions, comments, or talking points to make at the meetings.

Weld said Casella is not paying any compensation to Ubaldo.

"Mr. Ubaldo, like many residents of Bethlehem, has approached Casella representatives with concerns about the cost-of-living increases and loss of services he is anticipating once NCES closes in 2027," said Weld.

“As is the case with any of our customers who contact us with questions about the services we provide, we are happy to answer Mr. Ubaldo’s questions to the best of our ability,” said Weld. “Since most of his questions do not pertain to our services, but are questions better suited to be answered by the town, he has been exercising his rights as a citizen to attend public meetings and ask questions of his elected representatives.”

Transfer Station Social Media Inaccuracies

During the Nov. 10 meeting, Strand read a letter into the record addressing a post on social media that asked many questions and expressed concerns about the town’s future transfer station.

Many of the concerns regard financing.

There has been transparency on financing and its options as well as on progress, including regular updates through the town’s transfer station committee, she said.

Strand said the committee has determined that a town transfer station can be realistically built and run.

In addition, representatives at the Mt. Carberry landfill told Bethlehem that it would not be a problem for Carberry to accept Bethlehem waste once the time comes.

“I’ll conclude with a personal opinion,” said Strand. “I do not believe in addressing controversial or adversarial comments on social media. While it’s tempting to respond, in my experience it often does not produce good dialogue or understanding, but elevates perceived grievances and can spin out of control.”



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