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Residents denied hearing on Old Town landfill

AUGUSTA - There will be no formal public hearing regarding the proposed West Old Town Landfill despite numerous requests from local residents. [Department of Environmental Protection](#) Commissioner Dawn Gallagher announced her decision not to hold a formal public hearing Wednesday afternoon, claiming the requests didn't meet the department's requirements to hold such a meeting.

The state is in the process of purchasing the West Old Town Landfill for \$25 million from Georgia-Pacific Corp. as a financial incentive to help maintain jobs at the company by lowering its operating costs.

The state has chosen Vermont-based Casella Waste Systems, the only bidder on the project, as the landfill's operator. The state will act as the site's owner, but it is illegal for it to operate the facility.

"I have decided that rather than holding a formal public hearing, that the best way to inform citizens is to have another public forum," Gallagher said Wednesday. That forum, however, will not come until after the commissioner makes her decision on whether to approve the amendment application currently on the table.

The purchase and sale agreement for the proposed landfill between G-P and the state was signed Nov. 20, but the Department of Environmental Protection must approve the amendment application before the sale can be completed. That decision was supposed to come Feb. 13, but Gallagher has decided to delay her decision a few days to get more information from other involved parties.

At a public information meeting sponsored by the State Planning Office last week, residents asked questions of the state and other agencies involved in the proposed landfill, as well as providing testimony as to why they feel the facility is a bad idea. The emotional and heated meeting lasted more than five hours and residents still were not satisfied at its outcome.

"I just feel like we really didn't have our questions answered at the first [public meeting]," Debbie Gibbs of Alton said Wednesday. Gibbs is a member of We The People, a group made up of residents who are opposed to the landfill and are seeking more information on the topic.

At a formal public hearing, proceedings are conducted much like they would be in a courtroom and residents would not have the ability to present their opinions as they do at a public forum, Gallagher said.

The West Old Town Landfill was licensed by the Board of Environmental Protection in 1993 and is currently operated as a generator-owned landfill that takes waste only from Georgia-Pacific and Lincoln Pulp and Paper. Gallagher said that some of the issues that came up at last week's meeting had to do with the initial licensing and not the current process. She also said concerns such as traffic and the selection of Casella as the operator had nothing to do with the environmental issues that the

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meeting was designed to address.

The current DEP process is limited to the changes and modifications at the landfill and has nothing to do with the initial permit, Gallagher said.

"I'm just kind of in shock that they're not going to have a formal public hearing on this," Gibbs said.

Gallagher plans to make a draft decision by around mid-February. After the draft decision is announced, there is a mandatory five-day public comment period during which the commissioner intends to hold another public forum.

"People [will] have a copy of the draft decision in their hands before we have this public forum," Gallagher said. "I think it's important that people have a document that they can look at and ask questions about."

The commissioner said she wants to have the benefit of hearing from residents and answering their questions before she issues her final decision regarding the proposed landfill.

If residents disagree with the commissioner, Gallagher said they still could sway her final decision after she presents her draft decision. Gallagher said she expects to reach a final decision on the proposed West Old Town Landfill by the end of next month.

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