

Brattleboro Reformer

Landfill vote may hold no weight *Saturday, September 13, 2003*

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ROCKINGHAM -- A group of residents opposed to the proposed landfill along the Connecticut River may ask the selectboard to suspend the public information meetings planned for the next four months and seek a vote before next year's town meeting.

But Kathy DeWolfe, director of elections for Vermont Secretary of State said, "If the matter is not one the electorate is required to vote on, then the selectboard may not be required to hold the meeting."

According to Tom Heron, a member of the Friends and Neighbors of Missing Link Road, the first meeting, billed as an informational session by Casella Waste Systems Inc., was a waste of time. If Casella is not willing to provide more details, Heron said, it may be time to ask Rockingham residents if they want a landfill in their back yard.

"We are rethinking the value of these meetings," Heron said. "The selectboard and the town manager (are) going through considerable efforts and expense, and if Casella is not going to be more forthcoming we may suggest to bring it to a head and have a townwide vote."

"We've given Casella the opportunity to make a presentation and give their point of view," Heron continued. "The town has lived up to its obligation."

Representatives from Casella Waste faced a frustrated group of around 200 people at a Sept. 3 meeting. Four Casella representatives laid out the timeline for the project, and talked about the permitting process, but gave very little in the way of specifics on the size of the landfill, the amount of traffic it could bring, or how it might effect the neighborhood.

Attempts to reach Casella Waste Systems on Friday were unsuccessful.

"We were witness to deliberate stonewalling and ambiguity," Heron said. "I think it is time to ask the town."

But one town official said a vote now would be premature.

"That would not be appropriate at all," said selectboard chairman Lamont Barnett about a rushed vote. "I think expectations were high for the first meeting. There have been no applications filed, and until you get into that process, specifics on traffic or on the environmental impact are not available. To obligate the town to vote is kind of vague."

Approval of a special vote would require 250 signatures, or 5 percent of the registered voters, Barnett said.

Barnett said the selectboard really has little authority on the landfill issue, and a townwide "no" vote would not carry much weight.

A town vote against the landfill would merely be one part of a very lengthy Act 250 application.

"The commission weighs the evidence in favor of the project, and then weighs that against what is submitted on the other side," said Linda Matteson, assistant coordinator for the District II Environmental Commission. "That is what Act 250 is all about."

The Act 250 application considers 27 criteria, said Matteson. Opponents are "almost never denied" an attempt to offer evidence against a project.

A town vote against the project would be a part of the application but, "if the town doesn't give a permit, I don't see how it would go forward," Matteson said.

"The law gives us criteria to use when making a decision," said Gail Stewart, chairwoman of the Rockingham Planning and Zoning Board, the local authority that issues a permit for the landfill.

"A townwide vote would have no bearing on the vote of the board," Stewart said. "Public pressure does not figure in to our decision."

Companies that want to build a landfill in Vermont must apply for a solid waste disposal facility permit from the Agency of Natural Resources.

But here, too, public sentiment is only one consideration in a complex process.

"We look for substantive comments," said state Environmental Analyst Buzz Surwilo. "If we say water flows one way, and the public can show it flows another, that we will consider. But we can not consider an opinion poll."

The specter of a giant landfill near one of Rockingham's oldest settlements has hung "like a cloud over the neighborhood," according to Herson. Residents, many of whom are elderly, want to put the issue to rest.

"We just want to get on with our lives," said Pearl Bingham, whose land overlooks the proposed landfill site. "It is a stressful situation. It has gone on and on and on, we want it to end."

Bingham has diabetes and a heart condition. She said Casella officials have approached area residents about buying their properties, but she disagrees with the idea of removing 200-year-old homes to build a landfill.

"To demolish beautiful old homes to make room for a dump is very sad," Bingham said. "They don't realize these old homes have character. We will never sell, at any price."