

Panel mulls landfill

October 3, 2003

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BELLOWS FALLS — About 150 people gathered Wednesday night to listen to nine panelists discuss the impact a proposed landfill might have on the area's recreational, environmental and natural resources.

The meeting was one in a series of informational Select Board meetings and was held in the New Falls Cinema in Bellows Falls.

Among the presenters were Norton True, an engineer and area resident who showed pictures of the area's current scenic beauty and recreational opportunities.

David Deen, the Connecticut River Steward for the section of the river north of the Massachusetts border and a state legislator representing Saxtons River, Westminster and Dummerston, discussed the threat of large-scale erosion into the waterways at the proposed landfill site.

Doug Thurber, owner of Green Mountain Marina, said he believed his marina would go out of business if a landfill was opened at the proposed site, which is near his marina on the portion of Route 5 in Rockingham known as Missing Link Road.

Alyssa Schuren, the Vermont field director for the Toxics Action Center, presented her findings on some of the toxic substances found in municipal solid waste landfills in New York and California. John Lens, an engineer hired by the Friends and Neighbors of Missing Link Road, explained the geological history of the site. He said the particulars of the site's geology meant that "any large-scale, long-term or high-risk project, such as a landfill, needs to be extremely well studied."

Dennis Harty of the Abenaki Rod and Gun Club reported his organization's resolution that "The landfill would be a great detriment to the herds and flocks we have enjoyed for years, as well as to the fish in the area and downstream."

Audience applause briefly halted the presentation by Sharon Francis, executive director of the Connecticut River Joint Commissions of New Hampshire and Vermont after she said, "This proposed landfill has such a likelihood of adverse effects on the river that my commissioners have asked me to express our strong opposition."

She noted that the last time the commission spoke out on a local matter was in 1988.

"Is this the right site?" is a question that can only be answered locally," said Chris Wagner, chief of solid waste certification and compliance for the Vermont Agency of Natural Resources during his presentation. "The permitting process only asks if the application complies with regulations."

Two representatives of Casella Waste Systems were present in the audience, were introduced, but did not speak at the meeting.

Thornton Lillie, the owner of the proposed landfill property and a Rockingham selectman, did not sit at the table with his fellow Select Board members as he had at the September informational meeting. During the question-and-answer period, the audience, which had been quiet throughout most of the meeting, cheered George Manupelli, a selectman from Bethlehem, N.H., who spoke about his town's landfill problems, which include a protracted legal battle, high legal fees and rabid raccoons.

With the clock at the front of the theater reading 9 p.m., Lon Weston, another Bethlehem selectman, was dismayed at not being allowed to speak.

"We traveled four hours to speak to you," he said to Lamont Barnett, the Rockingham Select Board chairman, who was attempting to adjourn the meeting, which had been scheduled to run from 7 to 9 p.m.

After a brief — but heated — discussion, Barnett agreed to let the public to remain in the theater after the Select Board meeting was adjourned. The meeting was adjourned, and Weston stood in front of the audience and spoke without a microphone. He spoke again about the town's legal costs, and about the leaks and seeps that enter the local river, which is a tributary of the Connecticut River. Manupelli and Weston said they spoke on behalf of Bethlehem's entire five-member Select Board. The two are also members of the David and Goliath Trust, which raises money to help the town of Bethlehem meet the expenses of its landfill legal battles.

"The ending was a little feisty, but when you set rules for a meeting, you have to adhere to them," Barnett said after the meeting. "Overall, we had good questions answered by the panel." The next informational Select Board meeting on the landfill is scheduled for Nov. 5, and will cover traffic issues and possible impacts on historical sites.