

Rockingham mulls landfill plan tonight

September 3, 2003

(from the *Southern Vermont* section)

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BELLOWS FALLS — A proposed landfill and recycling center are the focus tonight in the first in a series of informational meetings about the 170 acres of land between Route 5 and the Connecticut River in Rockingham.

The meeting will begin at 7 p.m. in the Women's Club Meeting Room Rockingham Town Hall in the square in Bellows Falls.

Thornton Lillie, the property owner and a Rockingham selectman, believes the best intended use for the land his family has owned for 100 years is as a landfill and recycling center.

He is willing to sell his land to Casella Waste Systems of Rutland, which he called an environmentally friendly company. Casella will use the sand and clay pit as a landfill for 20 to 30 years, then cap it, leaving the area surrounding the landfill much as it exists today.

His neighbors disagree.

"We respect Thornton Lillie's right to sell his land to whomever he chooses," said Tom Hernon, who lives near the proposed landfill site and is an active member of Friends and Neighbors of Missing Link Road. (The proposed landfill site is located off a stretch of Route 5 known as Missing Link Road.)

"We just want to help him find a more suitable buyer," Hernon said.

As she handed out fliers in front of the Bellows Falls Post Office on Tuesday promoting the upcoming meeting, Margaret Perry, Lillie's neighbor on Upper Meadows Road and another active member of the group, said that for her, the debate is about the Connecticut River.

"Initially, the issue was my house, but I got beyond that. The more I learned, the more I realized that we shouldn't put landfills on rivers," Perry said.

Hernon said the group is trying to find funding for a mixed-use project on the site that would combine housing and recreational uses, such as hiking and riding trails and river access.

Hernon said his group is working with Lillie on the project, but Lillie said he was not inclined toward any project that would bring more residences to the site.

Joseph Fusco, a vice president at Casella Waste Systems, said of Casella's involvement at the site, "It's earlier in the process than people realize."

No detailed engineering or geological studies have been made and no state permit applications have been filed.

"It's a good time to spend the time to understand the process," he said.

Fusco said Casella plans to attend the informational meetings, at the Select Board's request, and plans to attend tonight's meeting.

Lamont Barnett, chairman of the Rockingham Select Board, said the board organized the series of five or six meetings.

The intent is to provide Rockingham citizens with the information they need to make an informed vote on the project, if needed, on Town Meeting Day in March.

That vote will direct the Select Board's opinion of the project for its Act 250 review, he said.

Barnett said that, as a selectman, Lillie shouldn't vote on any issue he has a financial interest in, but that the Select Board does not now intend to vote or debate the issue.

"On an issue this big, this emotional, the townspeople should have their way," he said.

"These meetings are not designed as, nor will they be, a forum for protest," he said.

"If the first two or three meetings are not productive, we will revisit the number of meetings we have."

Barnett said he expects the Women's Club Meeting Room capacity of 175 people to be sufficient for tonight's meeting, but that a larger venue is available in the town cinema for future meetings if attendance warrants it.