

## Bellows Falls: Landfill proposal gets no support (10/2/03)

By Will Coghlan for SentinelSource

BELLOWS FALLS — Thirty years ago, kids living by the Connecticut River were told that alligators lived in the water — a tall tale to keep them from swimming in the badly polluted river.

Now the Connecticut is clean enough to be called one of America's 14 national heritage rivers. And Wednesday night, Rockingham residents vehemently said they intend to keep it that way.

More than 100 residents from both side of the river turned out Wednesday night for the second informational meeting on plans to build a regional landfill on Missing Link Road. Many said they were concerned about environment damage since the site is less than 500 feet from the river's edge.

The informational session, one of several planned before a non-binding vote is held, was organized by the Rockingham selectboard and a community group called the Friends and Neighbors of Missing Link Road.

Casella Waste Systems Inc. wants to build a lined landfill on Missing Link Road, just off Route 5. The property is now a gravel pit owned by Rockingham Selectman Thornton Lillie. Lillie didn't attend Wednesday's meeting. Two Casella representatives were there, but they stayed silent.

Focusing on the environmental impact of the proposed landfill, the two-hour session was divided into a series of presentations by a panel of engineers, environmental scientists, business owners, river advocates and state officials.

All those who spoke expressed varying degrees of opposition to the idea of hauling 150,000 tons of trash each year to a site so close to the river.

"We're not talking about our opposition to a landfill," said Norton G. True, a civil and environmental engineer from Rockingham. "We're talking about opposing a landfill in an environmentally sensitive area."

The proposed landfill site on Missing Link Road is located on a section of the river's bank characterized by soft soils and frequent "slumping," said John Lens, a geologist and civil engineer who has surveyed the site. The soil conditions cause large chunks of land to slide into the river on an unpredictable basis, he said.

The proposed landfill site is officially 450 feet from the river's edge, which satisfies the state's regulation of a 300-foot minimum setback. The erosion could change that setback, some argued.

David Deen, a Vermont state legislator representing Westminster, Putney and Dummerston, said a capped landfill — which is what the site would become after its expected 25-year life span — would drastically increase the amount of run-off that enters nearby Commissary Brook, a tributary of the Connecticut. The extra run-off would increase the erosion problems there.

Others said they were worried about more immediate damage. The landfill design calls for a double-layer, plastic liner, but some said that technology is not guaranteed to be leak-proof.

“The big question is not if it will leak, but when it will leak,” said Alyssa Schuren of the Toxic Action Network Center, a Montpelier-based community advocate group.

Schuren cited studies that show an increased rate of certain cancers in people living near landfills. “I think the most pertinent question is whether this is a responsible site for the landfill,” she said.

Chris Wagner, a representative of the Vermont Agency of Natural Resources, said that while landfill technology has improved, nearly all landfills will eventually leak hazardous materials.

“There is no perfect solution,” said Wagner.

Along with preserving the river, a number of panelists talked about a landfill’s impact on air quality, wildlife and area tourism.

Doug Thurber is the owner of the Green Mountain Marina, located just downstream from the proposed site.

“It’s going to be a short-lived business for me if they let that landfill go in,” said Thurber, who bought his business two years ago.

Dennis Harty, a representative of the Abenaki Rod and Gun Club, said the group’s membership had voted unanimous opposition to the plan.

Sharon F. Francis of Charlestown, executive director of the New Hampshire-Vermont Joint River Commission, said building a landfill in Rockingham wasn’t just an issue for that town, but concern also for the New Hampshire towns that share the river.

Francis said the commission normally doesn’t weigh in on issues of local control, but this situation warranted special attention.

“Siting a major landfill adjacent to a river flies in the face of common sense,” said Francis. “I don’t think Rockingham wants to take responsibility for polluting the river.”

Rockingham residents have taken dead aim at the landfill proposal ever since a real estate company started calling on Missing Link Road neighbors last year, offering buy-out deals.

Since then, a group of local activists quietly purchased 34 acres of land to block Casella’s access between the gravel pit and the road.

At a September informational session, Casella representatives outlined the landfill plan, but offered few specifics.

Rockingham Selectman Ann DiBernardo said the board has met with Casella, and nearly all the elements of the plan are still classified as “negotiable”.

Wednesday night, though, two selectmen from Bethlehem made the three-hour trip south to tell the Rockingham crowd of their town’s saga since Casella bought a landfill there in 1992.

Since then, said Selectmen Lon Weston and George Manupelli, the town has been mired in legal battles with the company that are costing the town nearly one-tenth of its annual budget.

The next public meeting on the landfill plans will be held on Nov. 5.