

# Newport City Council Refuses To Treat Landfill Leachate

## Mayor: Council Took Courageous Action To Stop Putting Leachate Effluent Into International Lake Memphremagog

- Robin Smith



Robert Benoit of Memphremagog Conservation Inc. gives a Canadian Flag to Henry Coe of DUMP in September. They successfully got the Newport City Council to stop treating landfill leachate at the city's wastewater treatment plant. (File Photo)



Newport City's wastewater treatment plant. (Courtesy Photo)

NEWPORT CITY — The city council voted unanimously Monday to stop accepting leachate from the landfill in Coventry to be treated at the city's wastewater plant.

The decision to stop treating 15,000 gallons a day of leachate, the liquid that drains from within the liners of the state's only landfill, will remain in effect until it's determined to be safe, according to the council.

The council also voted to take a stand against the expansion of the landfill owned by Casella and operated by its subsidiary, New England Waste Services of Vermont (NEWS-VT). The council will write a letter in opposition to the regional Act 250 commission which is reviewing the expansion.

The decision will cost the city \$185,000 in annual income from NEWS-VT, which will have to be made up through sewer fees, city officials said. With 1,600 users in the city, the fee for each user should go up about \$29 quarterly.

"It took courage for the council," Mayor Paul Monette said Tuesday.

"I'm pleased. I really am. We sent a message" that the city wants to keep international Lake Memphremagog clean, he said.

Newport City was one of a group of municipalities in Vermont and elsewhere that treats leachate from the landfill. Joe Gay, chief engineer at the landfill, could not be reached for comment Tuesday afternoon on the impact of losing the city treatment plant as an option.

Effluent from the city's treatment plant flows into the Clyde River and then to international Lake Memphremagog, which provides drinking water for more than 150,000 Quebec residents in the Magog-Sherbrooke area.

Robert Benoit, president of the international Memphremagog Conservation Inc. based in Magog, Quebec, said his group has pressed for the city to stop treating the leachate for 15 years.

"We were very pleased with it," Benoit said of the city's decision. He attended the council meeting Monday evening to hear the two-hour debate before the vote.

Quebec residents and officials in local governments are overjoyed at the news, he said. Now they have to lobby Vermont politicians to have the state find another location to entomb the state's garbage rather than at the headwaters of the lake, he said.

Charlie Pronto, chief spokesman of the citizens' group DUMP (Don't Undermine Memphremagog's Purity), was surprised and thrilled with the council's decision.

"I applaud them for the stance they took. It's not easy to give up \$185,000 to do the right thing," said Pronto, a former mayor of the city.

Alderman Denis Chenette made the motion for the city to stop accepting the leachate, seconded by Alderman Dan Ross. Alderman Kevin Charboneau voted for it. The mayor said he supported it as well. Alderwoman Julie Raboin was unable to attend the meeting.

Chenette was blunt about his concern that the leachate from the landfill contained PFAS. These are newly recognized chemicals that are present in leachate that have been discovered to affect human health in very small amounts. They have caused problems with drinking water sources in Bennington and elsewhere in Vermont.

“I didn’t like the fact that the state isn’t sure how to go about PFAS,” Chenette said Tuesday.

“We had the opportunity to say we don’t want it here,” he said. “Yes, (it will) raise the rates. I am willing to pay my fair share.”

He hopes the city council decision will push the state to get aggressive about how leachate is handled.

The Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation granted a solid waste permit to NEWS-VT on Friday to allow an expansion at the landfill for the next 10 years, critical for the Act 250 permit approval.

Leachate treatment at wastewater plants is under a separate permit. But the solid waste permit included language that sets deadlines for the state and for the landfill owner to research the best way to treat leachate for PFAS and other chemicals.

Chenette also wants the old unlined Nadeau dump next to the NEWS-VT landfill to be dealt with. The Act 250 commission wants the landfill owner to clean that up eventually, but there’s been concern about whether exposing the old waste would allow more pollution to get into the lake than if it’s left undisturbed.

Chenette said he understood that Newport’s decision to stop treating leachate meant it would have to go somewhere else, calling the decision “bittersweet.”

But he said other municipalities may also have to look at what they are treating.

Monette said he heard from many city residents who asked the council to stop treating the leachate.

He said he wanted to make sure that the council discussed the financial impacts Monday evening so that water and sewer users know the costs.

“I wanted to be transparent,” he said.

Pronto and Benoit say the next step is to pressure Vermont lawmakers to do something about how garbage and the resulting leachate is handled in Vermont.

DUMP has filed for party status in the Act 250 commission review of the permit amendment application sought by NEWS-VT. The request is at the eleventh hour in the review, long after hearings were over. The commission was waiting for the solid waste permit to be issued.

“I’m pretty sure we have good grounds for it,” Pronto said.

He was critical of state officials who issued the solid waste permit.

The department “abdicated their responsibility,” Pronto said.

He said the problem now falls to the Act 250 commission or the Legislature.