

‘We don’t want to be the dumping ground for all of New England’

By Elizabeth Gribkoff

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Henry Coe, secretary of the grassroots group DUMP, addresses a crowd gathered in Newport to hear about the Coventry landfill expansion. Photo by Elizabeth Gribkoff/VTDigger

NEWPORT – Vermonters and Canadians who live near the Coventry landfill are frustrated over their lack of say as to whether the state approves a 51-acre expansion to the state’s biggest trash disposal site.

Over 100 people crowded into Newport’s waterfront Gateway Center Monday night to question a panel of state officials and conservationists about the landfill expansion.

DUMP, the grassroots group that formed to oppose the landfill expansion and hosted the public hearing, wants third-party environmental testing, a legal role in the permitting process and a statewide plan for trash disposal sites outside of the Coventry area, according to member Charlie Pronto.

“We don’t want to be the dumping ground for all of New England,” he said at the meeting.

The Coventry landfill, owned by Casella Waste Systems, is the state’s last open landfill and takes in around 70 percent of Vermont’s trash, as well as additional waste from outside the state.

Casella [received initial approval](#) from the state Agency of Natural Resources in late May for a 10-year recertification of the existing operation and a 51-acre expansion to the south. The agency received over 90 comments on the draft certification following a June [public meeting in Coventry](#).



Cathy Jamieson, head of the state’s solid waste management program, speaks as part of a panel on the Coventry landfill expansion. Photo by Elizabeth Gribkoff/VTDigger

An overarching concern at Monday’s meeting was that the landfill’s location — on the northern border of the state next to a river that flows into Lake Memphremagog, which provides drinking water to Quebec — was not the right place for Vermont’s sole landfill.

Multiple meeting attendees expressed concern that the thousands of chemicals found in leachate (liquid runoff from landfills) were not adequately removed at Newport’s wastewater treatment plant.

The plant treats around half a million gallons of leachate every year that are mixed in with effluent flowing into the Clyde River, a Memphremagog tributary. Coventry leachate is also trucked to wastewater treatment plants around the state.

Ariane Orjikh, a biologist with conservation nonprofit Memphremagog Conservation Inc., urged state officials to apply “the precautionary principle” because “of the importance of Lake Memphremagog as a drinking water reservoir.” More than 30 Quebecois attended the meeting.

Pronto noted that because of agreements to treat leachate in Burlington, Montpelier and other municipalities, “this is not just the Northeast Kingdom’s problem.”

Wastewater treated at the Newport plant has to meet the state’s surface water standards, and this August, the state required Casella to test for PFAS contamination at six groundwater wells by the landfill. Exposure to PFAS through drinking water can lead to immune system effects, cancer, thyroid disease and low birth weight.



The Coventry landfill, operated by Casella Waste Systems. Chittenden Solid Waste District photo

Cathy Jamieson, head of the state's solid waste management division, said at the meeting that one of the wells adjacent to the unlined portion of the landfill — a remnant of an on-site dump prior to Casella's ownership — had 116 ppt of PFAS. The state's drinking water standard is 20 ppt. ANR will likely require additional testing to determine whether that contaminated groundwater is moving further away from the unlined landfill, she said.

"That probably should be fixed before any more permitting is allowed," said Rep. Brian Smith, R-Derby.

Joe Fusco, vice president of Casella, said it plans to excavate the unlined portion of the landfill and place the contents in the lined portion 25 years from now. He noted that Casella has monitored groundwater downslope from the landfill for 10 years, and will continue to do so to ensure that there are no impacts to the Black River.

He said local pushback was an "expected part of any such process."

"People sometimes have an emotional reaction to the idea of landfills — and that feeling is often less than favorable," he said in an email.

"Feelings or biases aside, the inescapable fact is that a modern landfill like the Coventry landfill — highly regulated, highly engineered, relentlessly permitted — currently plays an important role in how our Vermont manages the waste it produces and is a crucial part of the infrastructure necessary to manage public and environmental health," Fusco said.

A number of residents expressed concerns over the [odor and increasing size of the landfill](#). "The dump lump is becoming a dump mountain and it's very alarming," said Christina Cotnoir, a Derby resident.

Meeting attendees also questioned why out-of state waste, including coal ash and construction debris, was accepted at the landfill. This waste constitutes around 25 percent of the approximately 500,000 tons of waste brought to the landfill each year.

Chuck Schwer, director of the state's waste management and prevention division, noted that the landfill has restrictions on what is taken in from other states and that out-of-state waste is approved on a case-by-case basis.



Joseph Fusco, vice president of Casella Waste Systems. Photo by Anne Galloway/VTDigger

Jen Duggan, director of Conservation Law Foundation of Vermont, said that approval of an expansion should be pushed back until the state fully implements its universal recycling laws in 2020. She noted that a 2013 state waste audit showed that 67 percent of Vermonters' waste could have been recycled or composted.

John Stelter of Irasburg said that the intention of legislation that closed unlined, and environmentally hazardous, dumps around the state was not to have one landfill for all of Vermont. He requested state officials work with residents to develop a plan for "regional landfills."

"We get 90 percent of the fricking traffic," he said of the trucks passing through Irasburg on their way to and from the landfill.

Schwer suggested that community members work with legislators if they want to bring about substantive change to the state's solid waste policies. He cautioned that regional landfills can be prohibitively expensive.

A Vermont Supreme Court ruling stymied the Chittenden Solid Waste District from building a landfill in the '90s because the district could not require haulers to dispose of waste within the county, said Schwer. Without that requirement, the landfill was not economically viable, he noted.

Schwer and Jamieson noted multiple times that the agency does not have the authority to deny the expansion if Casella's application complies with the state's solid waste rules.

"None of our policies direct where a landfill is sited," said Jamieson.

Whether or not the expansion moves ahead will rest on the Act 250 permitting process.

Kirsten Sultan, a coordinator for the state's environmental commission in the Northeast Kingdom, said in an interview Tuesday that [Casella's Act 250 permit amendment application](#) for the expansion is on hold until it obtains the final approval from ANR.

She noted that Casella had recently provided the commission with additional information that was requested in June, which is now being reviewed by the commission and other parties.