

Landfill proposal: How many millions? Committee debates costs, size of facility

By Greg Elias
Observer staff

The debate over whether to build a controversial landfill in Williston now includes the high cost of waste disposal. It turns out that the price tag for a deluxe dump – nearly \$150 million – may be too expensive for even ardent supporters.

The original proposal called for a \$26 million facility that would last 18 years. Since then, various scenarios have been developed, each with more capacity, longer life and greater expense.

The latest scenario developed by a Chittenden Solid Waste District consultant calls for a dump with a 56-year lifespan. An initial \$86 million bond would fund the first phases of construction.

(All figures are expressed in current dollars and exclude inflation. The estimates include only the cost of building the landfill.)



Photo by Greg Elias

Williston resident Dave Ward disposes of brush Monday at the Chittenden Solid Waste District's drop-off center. The district wants to build a 66-acre landfill.

The waste district's executive committee, a subset of the 16-member governing board, discussed the new scenario at its Aug. 8 session. The committee had different opinions on whether the scenario was too ambitious, according to meeting minutes.

Some committee members sided with CSWD general manager Tom Moreau, who wants to delay a permit application for the landfill and develop a downsized plan.

Among them is Mike Coates, Williston's representative on the waste district's governing board, who said "there is no way in hell" that taxpayers will support the expenditure. But Coates emphasized that despite organized opposition from some Williston residents he still favors building a dump in Williston – just not one that expensive.

Moreau agreed that the public simply would not back something so costly. And the district should not make a hasty pick, he said, because the solid waste business is evolving and he wants to further study ways to recycle or divert trash that would otherwise go into a dump.

"Over the past year, sustainability has become more than just a buzz word," he said. "There's more emphasis than ever on technology."

Landfill opponents quickly honed on the costliest scenario as another reason not to build the dump proposed at a 66-acre site off Redmond Road.

Members of Vermont Organized Communities Against Landfills held a news conference last week to reiterate calls for reducing waste and increasing recycling. Among the signs held by members was one that read, "\$94 million what a waste!"

"If we spend all those millions of dollars digging a big hole and throwing trash in, it is a completely unnecessary waste of our resources," VOCAL president Steve Casale said in an interview.

With so many other public needs unmet, he said it would be irresponsible to build a landfill. He said there is plenty of capacity to accommodate waste at two existing private landfills and two yet-to-be-built facilities elsewhere in the state.

The latest scenario is the seventh developed by the waste district. The projected life of the first three ranged from 18 to 27 years and came with estimated price tags between \$26.3 million to \$38.4 million.

The district then continued to develop scenarios as it weighed competing priorities. Moreau said the district is trying to balance the interests of neighboring homeowners and the region as a whole as well as environmental concerns.

The latest four scenarios came after the district learned that digging a deeper and hence larger pit in which to bury trash could benefit the environment. Aside from having a longer lifespan, a deeper landfill would fall below the water table, Moreau said. That would allow the use of water pressure to prevent leakage, and the design would facilitate pollution monitoring.

The most expensive scenario would have still saved money in the long run. But for the first 33 years of the landfill's operation, it would have cost more to operate than the current arrangement, Moreau said. Only in the final two-plus decades would the public save money.

"It's really intangible when people can't see the saving until the end," he said. "I just didn't think it was realistic that this thing was going to pass."

Of equal concern are long-term revenue prospects. Tipping fees – per-ton charges to commercial haulers – were originally projected at \$86 a ton. But Moreau said he recently learned that those numbers may be too optimistic.

His research showed that the highest-volume haulers may actually be paying less than \$60 a ton. Lower revenue could make the most expensive scenarios no cheaper in the long run than trucking waste to existing dumps in Coventry and Moretown.

Study of the landfill proposal will continue next month, at which time the district will begin to develop a set of criteria for another, less costly scenario, Moreau said. The next meeting of the CWSD board is scheduled for Sept. 26.

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