

Issue: VA-Environment

Proposed Landfill in Cumberland County

Executive Summary

In 2018, Green Ridge Recycling and Disposal Facility, LLC (“Green Ridge”) proposed a new and very large—54,000,000 cubic yards—municipal solid waste sanitary landfill in Cumberland County, near the western border of Powhatan County. The Cumberland County Board of Supervisors approved the plan. Green Ridge filed the permit application and associated documents with the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) in January, 2020. The review process has begun, with supplemental studies and plans provided as requested by the DEQ. No permit has been issued yet.

The Cumberland County Board of Supervisors approved the plan based on the need for a landfill in their area and the anticipated income it will generate. Nearby residents in Cumberland and Powhatan Counties are concerned about associated traffic, noise, visual disturbance, and pollution. Opponents of the landfill see the issue as a classic case of jobs versus the environment, and jobs versus social injustice. They assert that another landfill is not needed in the state. Proponents of the landfill point to the economic benefits to the county, the need to begin planning a new landfill while there is adequate lead time, and the rapidly diminishing capacity of landfills in the state due to increasing rates of trash generation and reduced recycling capability.

Legislative efforts to stop the landfill by imposing additional size and siting restrictions on any new landfill have failed or been watered down. The sole surviving legislation will establish a study to review tipping fees (which are the fees per load to be deposited) and investigate why 25% of waste deposited in Virginia landfills is coming from out of state. It is worth noting that Green Ridge states its landfill will only accept waste from Virginia.

Discussion

What is a mega-landfill? Is another one needed in Virginia?

The size of the proposed landfill, 54,000,000 cubic yards with up to 5,000 tons of trash deposited each day, qualifies it as a “mega-landfill”—which is any landfill with a final capacity greater than 35,000,000 cubic yards. There are currently seven such large landfills in the state, as well as numerous smaller landfills. Determining whether there is adequate capacity can be deceptive, because some of the smaller landfills are closing and the state’s annual Solid Waste Report does not take closures or increased waste generation into account with its capacity calculations.¹

Opponents of the landfill note that over a quarter of the waste deposited in Virginia’s landfills comes from out of state. For instance, roughly 22.5 million tons of solid waste were deposited in Virginia landfills during the 2019 calendar year; of that, roughly 5.8 million tons came from outside the state. Nearly 97% of that waste came from immediate neighbors: Maryland, New York, New Jersey, North Carolina and Washington, D.C.²

The Case Against the Landfill: Environmental and Social Justice Concerns

Residents of the area are concerned about noise, pollution, and traffic from the landfill during its construction and operation. The Frederick Douglass Foundation and members of the Healthcare Equality Network note that Cumberland County is more than one-fifth black. If the landfill is built, they say it will be yet another example of the power of large companies to diminish the quality of life for residents who lack the resources to defend themselves.^{3, 4}

An additional complication is that the proposed site is within five miles of the Pine Grove Elementary School. This school, one of a network of Rosenwald Schools, was built in 1917 for the purpose of educating black children in that time of segregation, thanks to the efforts of Booker T. Washington and Julius Rosenwald. That school has been listed by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and efforts are under way to develop it as a historic site.⁵

The Case for the Landfill: County and State Economics, Dwindling Room, Time

Cumberland County is a very poor county with a small tax base—just under 10,000 residents call the county home.^{6, 7} County revenues come from property taxes and real estate taxes. The county supervisors state that revenue from a large business is needed. Republic Services, formerly Allied Waste, had permits to build a landfill in the county. The county, in anticipation of increased revenue, invested in improvements to its school system. Then Republic Services changed its plans and cancelled its permits, leaving the county further in debt.

Another landfill operator, Green Ridge, paid \$400,000 to Cumberland County as an application fee. Green Ridge has donated \$60,000 to the Cumberland school system to fund minority scholarships. They donated \$4,000 for band uniforms. They offered to donate money to preserve the Pine Grove Elementary School, although the preservation societies have turned down the money.⁸

In its permit application, Green Ridge states that the apparent spare landfill capacity in the state is smaller than it seems due to impending closures of some landfills and the increasing rate of trash generation in the state.⁹ As of this writing, the permit application reviewers have not publicly contradicted these claims. It also makes the case that the existing mega-landfills all belong to one of two companies.¹⁰ By providing an alternate destination for waste, Green Ridge will help keep users' costs down. By only serving customers from within the state of Virginia, Green Ridge will serve local needs rather than allowing other states to import waste to its landfill.¹¹

Lead Times Involved

The permit application submitted by Green Ridge notes that the lead time for opening new landfills is on the order of years, as a permit application is only the beginning. The Virginia Department of Environmental Quality keeps the full set of application forms and tracks the review process at its page titled "Get Involved."¹² The permit application was filed in January 2020. As of this writing, the requests for further information—and the responses from the company—continue. The permit approval process requires review of the landfill design, environmental protection measurements, and monitoring requirements to ensure those protections are followed. Once all aspects of the landfill are approved, then the construction plans have to be put out for bid and then be approved. Those are only a few of the steps involved in designing and constructing a new landfill. In the meantime, space in the state's other landfills will continue to diminish—and the county will still have no income from the project.

Legislative Efforts to Stop the Landfill

Four state laws were proposed that would have stopped or delayed this landfill and affected the development or expansion of any other landfill in the State of Virginia. Only one remains under consideration. In brief, the failed laws would have required approval from nearby establishments before a landfill could have been expanded or built; prevented the building of a landfill near a historic preservation site; and required what amounts to a cost-benefit analysis of a landfill for the surrounding area. It should be noted that a report of economic benefits to the surrounding community is currently an optional submission for the annual Solid Waste Report required by each landfill; no landfills chose to submit such an analysis for Calendar Year 2019.¹³

Bills, Year	Issue or Title	Lead Sponsor	Most Recent Action
SB 1200, 2021	Waste Disposal, Local Approval	Hashmi (D, SD-10, Midlothian)	Failed in Committee
SB 1186 2021	Landfill Siting, Historic Preservation	Hashmi (D, SD-10, Midlothian)	Failed in Committee
SB 409, 2020	Landfills, large; local impact	Hashmi (D, SD-10, Midlothian)	Failed in Committee
SB 1210, 2021	Permit fees; DEQ to revise current schedule for nonhazardous solid waste management fees	Peterson (D, SD34, Fairfax)	Awaiting vote in Agriculture, Chesapeake and Natural Resources Committee

Waste is a Complex Issue

It is very easy to forget that all waste has to go somewhere. When something is thrown away, one of three fates awaits it: incineration; recycling / reuse; or landfilling. Incineration can produce energy, and some incinerators exist for energy recovery. However, incineration generates potentially harmful air emissions and generally produces ash that must be disposed of. Reuse is a good option for certain items, and should be encouraged. Reuse has its limits, however.¹⁴ Recycling is a sensible option, but not all materials can be recycled. At present, recycling rates have diminished because the markets for materials are significantly reduced. China, formerly this country's biggest purchaser of American waste products, has closed the door due to persistently contaminated materials. For example, a greasy pizza box can contaminate a load of cardboard or a single broken Pyrex bowl can contaminate a batch of glass.

That leaves landfills. The best way to reduce the need for landfills is to minimize waste generation, and that in turn requires thoughtful consumption on the part of the American public. It's a difficult educational issue, and it runs counter to this country's economic system that pushes production and consumerism.

Landfills are disagreeable, but necessary. Whether to allow a new one, and where to site it, is not as clear-cut an issue as it might seem. What is clear, and should be investigated, is why the State of Virginia makes it cost-effective for other states to import their solid waste for disposal.

¹ 2020 Annual Solid Waste Report for CY2019, Virginia DEQ,

<https://www.deq.virginia.gov/home/showpublisheddocument?id=4832>

² 2020 Solid Waste Annual Report for CY2019, Virginia DEQ, Table II;

<https://www.deq.virginia.gov/home/showpublisheddocument?id=4832>

³ https://richmond.com/opinion/columnists/robert-j-r-gurley-column-proposed-cumberland-county-landfill-perpetuates-environmental-racism/article_ad6086be-becl-5237-ba10-c5685b912e50.html

⁴ https://richmond.com/news/state-and-regional/effort-to-stop-mega-landfill-in-cumberland-county-fails-in-legislature/article_la50cd69-flfl-53cc-b25c-b57705801ca5.html#tncms-source=login

⁵ https://richmond.com/opinion/columnists/robert-j-r-gurley-column-proposed-cumberland-county-landfill-perpetuates-environmental-racism/article_ad6086be-becl-5237-ba10-c5685b912e50.html

⁶ <http://www.virginiaplaces.org/waste/cumberlandmegalandfill.html>

⁷ <https://statisticalatlas.com/county/Virginia/Cumberland-County/Overview>

⁸ https://richmond.com/news/state-and-regional/effort-to-stop-mega-landfill-in-cumberland-county-fails-in-legislature/article_la50cd69-flfl-53cc-b25c-b57705801ca5.html#tncms-source=login

⁹ See, for instance, the loss of a planned expansion of the Shoosmith landfill:

<https://www.deq.virginia.gov/home/showpublisheddocument/4067/637459806574430000>

¹⁰ <https://www.deq.virginia.gov/home/showpublisheddocument/1939/637426979682370000>

¹¹ <https://www.deq.virginia.gov/home/showpublisheddocument/1939/637426979682370000> (assures that waste will be only from Virginia; see pages 1 and 5)

¹² <https://www.deq.virginia.gov/get-involved/newsroom/current-issues/green-ridge-landfill>

¹³ 2020 Annual Solid Waste report for CY2019, Virginia DEQ, p.6,

<https://www.deq.virginia.gov/home/showpublisheddocument?id=4832>

¹⁴ <https://www.npr.org/2021/05/06/993821945/goodwill-doesnt-want-your-broken-toaster>