

CRRA votes unanimously to close Hartford's landfill

Finding 'reasonable' concerns, CRRA scrubs expansion plans

By Laurie Ledgard

The operator of Hartford's landfill, an odorous mountain of trash that is both an eyesore and nosedive for any I-91 driver, is dropping expansion plans and will close the landfill when it reaches capacity, in about three years.

"People don't want an expansion," says Steven T. Cassano, the mayor of Manchester and board member of the Connecticut Resources Recovery Authority (CRRA), which owns and operates the landfill.

The CRRA board voted unanimously at a special meeting to follow the recommendation of its steering committee and focus on long-term alternatives to using the landfill, rather than the short-term expansion plan.

CRRA had sought earlier this year to expand the 60-year-old landfill vertically, adding an estimated 1.5 million tons of trash by going up 50 additional feet. The landfill is located on a 104-acre site between I-91 and the Connecticut River in Hartford's North End.

The waste comes from the 70 member-towns in the CRRA's Mid-Connecticut Project, which stretches from the shoreline to the Massachusetts border and into Litchfield County.

Board members admit that North End residents they met with at an April public meeting made persuasive arguments against growing the landfill any further.

"There is justice in the issues brought to us by the residents in the North End," says board member Benson R. Cohn.

"This shows respect for the community," adds member Raymond O'Brien.

CRRA had agreed that if there was too much public outcry against landfill expansion, then it would not go forward with its plans.

"Reasonable people had reasonable concerns," says CRRA President Thomas D. Kirk.

"That's pretty forward thinking of them," says Marilyn Rossetti, executive director of Hartford Areas Rally Together (HART). "They did the right thing."

Board Chairman Michael A. Pace, Old Saybrook's first selectman, says he called or met with a number of CRRA stakeholders to alert them of the pending vote, including Hartford Mayor Eddie Perez, Secretary Marc Ryan of the Office of Policy and Management, and State Treasurer Denise Nappier.

Referring to Perez, Pace says, "I had a general sense of his support for this."

Pace notes that the CRRA decision regarding the landfill will not affect tipping fees, which will remain at their current market rate. The board will also

continue working with the city to develop a closing plan and to find any potential uses for the property, he adds.

Most of what goes into the Hartford landfill today — almost 32,061 tons in 2003 — is known as bulky waste. The landfill also takes "nonprocessables" — large items that can't be burned and converted to electric power, such as furniture and construction debris. It also takes about 75,000 tons a year in process residue from the South Meadows trash-to-energy plant, where most of the region's garbage ends up.

Ash is buried on a separate 16-acre area piece of the 104-acre site after it is taken from CRRA's

South Meadows plant. Pace says the ash landfill has at least another seven years of capacity left.

Kirk, voicing sentiments similar to those of other board members, says that it is "better" for CRRA to find long-term solutions to the landfill situation. Expansion would have been a short-term fix, he noted, and in a few

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— Board member Benson R. Cohn

HARTFORD BUSINESS JOURNAL

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Landfill

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years, it would have reached capacity.

Some of these long-term solutions include exporting the Mid-Connecticut Project's trash out-of-state, siting a new landfill elsewhere in Connecticut, or finding "other technological fixes"

new landfill site in the state.

Peter W. Egan, CRRA's director of environmental services, says the authority currently has a study under way that is trying to identify sites capable of handling 15 to 20 years of future trash capacity.

The results of that study are expected in September, Egan says.

"This is a good thing for Hartford



Hartford's landfill will be closed when it reaches capacity.

for the trash situation. Pace refers to this as "volume reduction technology."

Other short-term fixes following the landfill closing may include sending trash to landfills in Windsor and Manchester, although both those sites also have limited capacity left.

"There will be no solutions in the three-year window," Kirk says. "Long-term solutions will take five or more years."

Pace says that the CRRA has already started looking around for a

and a good thing for the health and social issues being raised," Perez says.

The city is proactively looking at the closure and monitoring issues that will arise when permanent closing of the landfill takes place, the mayor says.

At the same time, Perez has asked two city council members, Robert Painter and rJo Winch, to look into potential uses for the property after the landfill closes.

"We're trying to be proactive about this," Perez says.

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The Dirty Truth About Trash

North Meadows residents don't want to expand the landfill, which is the first thing travelers on I-91 see when entering Hartford. The mayor has yet to weigh in.

By Alexander Dworkowitz

It's hunting season in the North Meadows neighborhood. Wildlife biologists began patrolling the landfill there in April, picking off seagulls with shotguns. The biologists, employees of the United States Department of Agriculture, are not searching for trophies to put on their walls. They were brought in by the Connecticut Resources Recovery Authority, which manages the landfill, to help clean the site by killing off the birds that drop their feces on the nearby car dealerships and homes.

"Looking at the site of the landfill now, it's not the way it should be," admits Thomas Kirk, CRRA president. "But it will be soon."

CRRA, the quasi-public agency that runs Connecticut's sanitation services, is considering filing an application with the state to increase the maximum allowable height of the landfill from 138 feet to 188 feet, keeping it open until 2012. The CRRA is running out of room at the northern Hartford dump, which will have to shut down in two years if the expansion request is not granted. Finding an alternate location would be more expensive, and the CRRA's mandate is to provide trash services as cheaply as possible. Given that the landfill incurs state standards, the Department of Environmental Protection, if and when it receives an expansion application, may very well approve it.

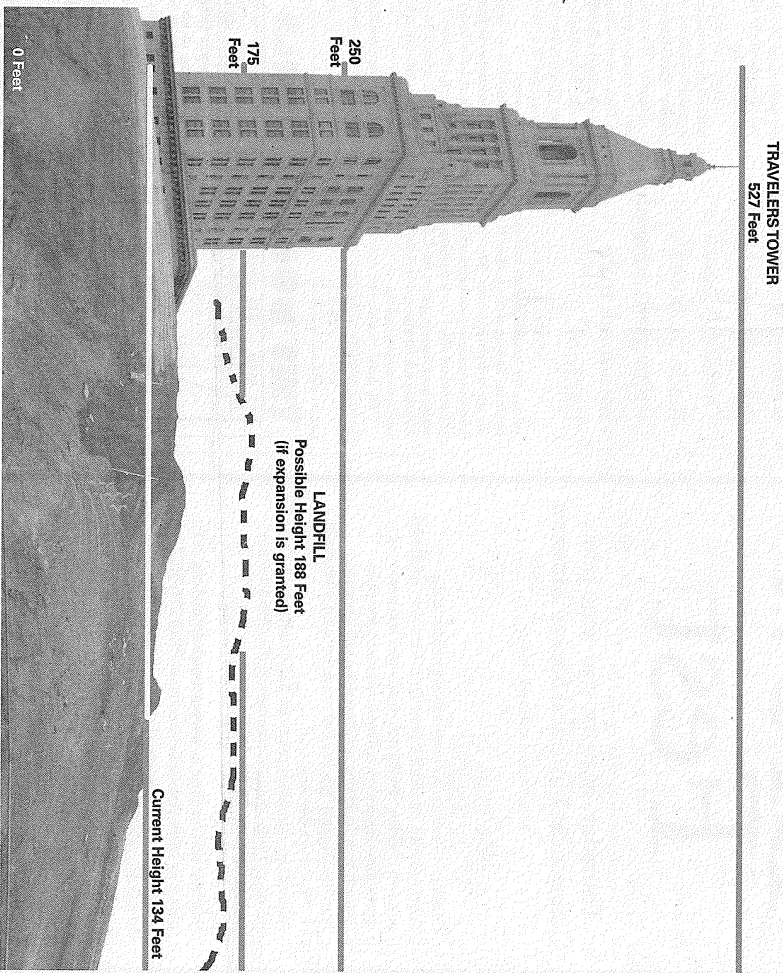
CRRA, however, is not taking the application process lightly. In making the birds and other problems at the landfill, the agency is trying to temper resistance to a possible expansion. "The more interesting question is the political issue," Kirk says. Agency representatives have begun meeting with Hartford residents, promising to stop the process if there is "significant" community opposition.

But just as importantly, the CRRA is courting City Hall. Over the last year, CRRA officials have been meeting with city officials to discuss the future of the landfill. At the center of the talks is the estimated \$1.4 million to cap the dump with a layer of synthetic fiber and maintain it for at least 30 years. The CRRA says the city is responsible for the \$1.4 million, a claim disputed by Mayor Eddie Perez's administration. So the CRRA has offered the city a deal: to cover the \$1.4 million if the expansion goes through. It would be a substantial gift to a city that struggles to keep schools open and police on the streets.

"We would either give it to the city or take the responsibility for closing," Kirk says. "Either way, the city will be off the hook."

In the meantime, the mayor has yet to speak publicly about the possible expansion.

The future of the landfill is the issue that never dies, and it won't quiet down anytime soon. The dump has existed since the 1940s, but until 1982 it was relatively small. That year, City Manager Woodrow Wilson Gaton signed off on a plan to allow the CRRA to use the Hartford landfill for the members of its mid-Connecticut Project, which has grown to 70 towns and 800,000 people. The influx of garbage led to two



expansions and a much bigger pile of trash.

"When I moved here, it was not a hill. It was a hole," says Heden Nixon, a North Hartford activist and resident of Sunset Street, the closest residential street to the dump. "And it has been growing and growing and growing and now it has become a mountain."

Why did the city approve such a deal in the first place? At the time, the plan to burn trash at a new South Meadows plant was portrayed as an inexpensive way to produce energy from trash, according to *Hartford Courant* articles from that year. The real concern at the time was the price of tipping fees, not the size of the landfill. Former Councilman John O'Connell, who was one of two on the Council who voted against the plan, says the Council was led to

Will the city agree to let the landfill grow?

believe that the trash-burning plan meant that garbage "would take up less space" and actually slow down the pace of growth of the landfill.

A *Courant* editorial lauded the move, saying "The City Council has acted responsibly by providing for a solution now, before the problem becomes desperate." Few took notice of a provision in the lease that allowed the CRRA to seek permits to continually expand the height of the landfill, a provision that also says that the city "shall cooperate" with the expansion applications.

Today, the dump has become a symbol of the city's struggles, welcoming visitors from Massachusetts and Bradley Airport traveling into Hartford along I-91. Before coming to the landfill, the trash from the 70 central Connecticut towns and cities first arrives

at the burning plant in South Meadows. The trash is separated. Most of the organic waste is burned into ash, which is then trucked to the 16-acre ash landfill in North Meadows. The remaining waste residue, along with bulky waste such as furniture, is taken to the larger 84-acre landfill, just to the south of the ash area. The current expansion plans only include the larger landfill, and the ash area is expected to shut down in 2009.

Many in Hartford see the dump as a health issue and are particularly concerned about asthma. Studies, however, have failed to prove any link between the landfill and health effects. (See sidebar)

But while the dump may not be giving anyone

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[Smell a Rat?]

SMELL A RAT? CONTINUED FROM PAGE 7

To North Hartford residents, race is at the center of the issue. Nearly all the residents who live within smelling distance of the dump are black. The CRRA board is made up entirely of white men, none of whom are from Hartford.

asthma, the landfill certainly has been a headache. Despite efforts to clean it up, the site still attracts birds. The North Meadows business community, which is composed mostly of car dealerships, currently has a lawsuit against the CRRA, claiming the bird droppings have lowered their property values.

"We have pictures of birds dive bombing customers and bird crap over

the cars," says Steve Gorss, the owner of the Super 8 Motel in North Meadows.

Sunset Street residents have also filed a suit against the CRRA.

The landfill can also smell. Everyone agrees the odor is not as bad as it used to be, but residents of Sunset Street, the neighboring Violet Street and southern portions of Windsor often complain about the smell on a hot summer day.

"I know you can't sit in my backyard in the summer. Because it stinks!" says Roma Marrow, a resident of Sunset Street.

Everyday, Metropolitan District Commission workers under a CRRA contract dump a pile of topsoil atop the landfill to help contain the smell, and wells and pipes collect the methane gas for electric use. Yet residents still complain of odors.

"The bottom line — landfills can still smell even despite the best efforts," says Neal Bolton, a California engineer who has written extensively on landfills. "I wouldn't want to live next to a landfill, even a well-run landfill, and no one should."

To North Hartford residents, race is at the center of the issue. Nearly all the

residents who live within smelling distance of the dump are black. The CRRA board is made up entirely of white men, none of whom are from Hartford. Dr. Mark Mitchell, president of the Connecticut Coalition for Environmental Justice, points to a recent University of Hartford study that determined the greatest predictor of where a trash facility is located is the percentage of people of color in the surrounding area.

"This is what we call environmental racism. It's the overburdening of communities of color," Mitchell says. "Why are certain communities selected to bear this disproportionate burden? Everybody produces trash. Why is it concentrated on communities of color?"

Some members of the City Council have already spoken against the possible expansion, despite the CRRA's \$14 million offer.

"They can keep the 14 million dollars," says Councilman Ken Kennedy. "It could be a billion dollars. No amount of money is enough."

But Mayor Perez has so far kept quiet, a concern to activists.

"I see this as a watershed issue for all elected officials in Hartford," says Steve Harris, an active member of Hartford's African American Alliance. "What does it take for elected officials to get behind neighborhood folks? They have been very quiet, so it has been very difficult

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to gauge."

Perez says he doesn't want to discuss the issue publicly until discussions between the CRRA and his office come to a conclusion.

"Until that happens, there is nothing to be said," he says.

While the city and CRRA will not comment on the exact nature of their talks, who is responsible for the \$14 million in disputed closure costs clearly is at the center of the conversation. The lease agreement says the CRRA is responsible for capping the landfill off with two feet of soil, but the document makes no mention of the \$14 million for a synthetic cover and 30 years of maintenance.

The city's case is not helped by state regulations, which say: "Responsibility for post-closure maintenance and monitoring of solid waste or special waste disposal areas shall rest with the property owner of record unless the assignment of those responsibilities to other persons is approved in writing by the [DEP] Commissioner." The property owner of record, of course, is the city.

A state official suggests that permits granted to the CRRA might be considered a tacit assignment of responsibilities to the CRRA, but it is clear that the city will not have an easy battle if the mayor chooses to fight over the \$14 million in court.

And if the mayor chooses to speak against the possible expansion, he violates the provision of the lease

that says the city must cooperate with expansion efforts. Such a move could put the city in legal hot water, a danger if the city decides to dispute the \$14 million in court.

Perez has other factors to consider. The CRRA currently pays about \$800,000 annually for the lease and other costs associated with the landfill. The day the landfill closes, the costs of providing garbage services to Hartford and the other 69 towns of the Mid-Connecticut Project will shoot up dramatically, since the agency will likely have to ship trash out of state. The increase is expected to cost Hartford, a city that is currently contemplating the shutdown of schools to save money, \$1 million a year.

"It's a tough decision for the folks that have to examine the political side of it," Kirk says. "The city should be taking advantage of a resource like this. It is a safe and environmentally acceptable alternative. It's financially in their best interest, clearly, and that has to be weighed against the realistic expectations of the North End."

In the end, the mayor must decide to either speak out against the expansion or quietly let the CRRA go about its business. For residents of Sunset Street, the answer is clear.

"Somebody has got to take the bull by the horn in the upper level of the city and say enough is enough," Nixon says.

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Is the Hartford Landfill Safe?

Some say neighbors of the site have gotten sick and died. But so far no hard evidence points to the dump.

It's a question that dozens of lawyers, environmental activists and state regulators have tackled over the last decade. So far, no one has been able to produce any hard evidence indicating that the landfill has damaged anybody's health.

A decade ago, with pollutants freely wafting off the dump and toward nearby residents, the landfill may very well have gotten people sick, says Dr. Mark Mitchell, president of the Connecticut Environmental Justice Coalition.

But in the mid-1990s, the CRRA spent \$13 million in improvements to the dump. It built wells designed to extract methane gas from the landfill to ultimately use for electricity. The CRRA also constructed an underground slurry wall that is designed to prevent leachate, the mixture of landfill materials and rainwater that often appears as a black goo, from entering the surrounding groundwater system. Wells on the outside of the slurry wall and the Connecticut River dike monitor the level of pollutants to make sure nothing gets through.

"In between 1992 and 1995, they did a lot to clean up the dump," Mitchell says. "Before that time, I think there was a lot more risk."

Mitchell, however, does point to a study showing elevated levels of chromium 6 coming from the landfill, noting the substance can contribute to asthma and cancer. Sunset Street residents say many on their street have died from cancer (hence their group's name, Survivors on Sunset). But Mitchell says the elevated levels of chromium are relatively low, and he notes diesel fumes from the highway are likely more damaging. North Hartford does have a high asthma rate, but the rest of the city has an equally high rate, health experts say.