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Local groups oppose Gardner sludge landfill expansion

By GREG VINE

For The Athol Daily News

ATHOL — The Athol-based Millers River Watershed Coalition (MRWC) announced earlier this week that it has cobbled together a number of environmental organizations from across the state in the hope of developing an alternative to the city of Gardner's plans to expand the landfill where it disposes of sludge from its sewage treatment system.

The Coalition for a Sustainable Alternative to Expanding Gardner's Sludge Landfill presently includes the MRWC, Athol Bird and Nature Club, Gardner Clean Air, Clean Water Action, the Connecticut River Conservancy, MassPIRG, the Mass. Rivers Alliance, Mount Grace Land Conservation Trust, and the North County Land Trust.

Asked about the need to form a statewide coalition to address an issue which, at first glance, appears to be local in nature, MRWC Director Ivan Ussach told the Athol Daily News, "It was really formed as a direct response to the situation in Gardner, but certainly there are overtones to how solid waste is being handled at a state level. In addressing the Gardner situation specifically, we may also end up addressing some larger level solid waste management issues for the state."

In a statement released by the MRWC, Ussach said, "Just about everyone wants to find an economical solution to dealing with Gardner's landfill sludge that is also environmentally friendly, and we are confident the city would find such a solution if it chose to look for one."

Ussach said that, at a 2016 City Council hearing, a number of residents and councilors expressed interest in finding an alternative to the problem. However, then-Mayor Mark Hawke threw his weight behind the expansion of the landfill.

"Hawke is gone, but the City Council has not been eager to take a fresh look at the options," said Ussach in the release.

The issue landed in the lap of current Gardner Mayor Michael Nicholson, who won a special election to replace Hawke, who resigned in January 2020.

"This is an issue I inherited," he told the Athol Daily News. "I've only



Entrance to the Gardner landfill located off of West Street/Route 68, near the Templeton town line, near the Cummings Conservation Area and the city-owned Wildwood Forest.

been here for a year and change. It's something that we are studying.

"We know that in the existing landfill we only have three years' worth of capacity left. So, the city is, right now, studying the merits of expansion versus another type of situation, such as anaerobic digestion. But we know from the consultants who have reviewed this in the past that Gardner does not produce enough sludge on our own through our water treatment facility to economically and sustainably operate an anaerobic digester."

Nicholson said that alternative would require intermunicipal agreements with other communities to allow them to truck their sludge to Gardner. He further explained anaerobic digestion also creates sludge, albeit a smaller amount, which would still require some sort of disposal. Nicholson said only one state currently accepts sewage sludge from out of state, adding that trucking it out of Gardner would be prohibitively expensive.

"We are," he said, "studying the merits and the costs of the different options that are out there because we are on somewhat of a timeline with that three-year capacity left in the landfill."

The mayor did say he was willing to consider alternatives to the landfill expansion, if they made sense and were cost-effective.

The landfill in question lies off of West Street/Route 68, near the Templeton town line, near the Cummings Conservation Area and the city owned Wildwood Forest.

Ussach said he welcomed Nicholson's willingness to keep an open mind, adding he's open to working with the city to find a solution to the issue.

"It's something that I would love to pursue," he said. "It's not something I've really had the chance to address because we haven't had any visible signs of interest by the city, to date. However, I think we would welcome that. I'm cautiously encouraged by the mayor saying he'll keep an open mind."

Asked why the Athol Bird and Nature Club decided to join the statewide coalition to oppose expansion of Gardner's sludge landfill, club president and acting executive director Dave Small said, "The Millers River Watershed Coalition has really been leading the parade on this, and they've made a pretty good case that it hasn't had enough scrutiny by the state DEP (Department of Environmental Protection). We really want to make sure that all the i's are dotted and it doesn't seem that that's been the case to this point.

"There are vernal pools and other things there that need to be examined more."

Small added the landfill gets very close to the Otter River, which is a major tributary of the Millers River.

Small said he hopes that adding the Bird and Nature Club to the larger coalition will assist in finding a workable alternative to expansion of the landfill.

"Our main role," he said, "is to support the Watershed Coalition and to get the word out in the broader community to make sure people are aware. You know, public pressure can make sure that things are done correctly." *Greg Vine can be reached at gvineadn@gmail.com*