

Further review needed for Gardner landfill expansion



The proposed Gardner sludge landfill gets very close to the Otter River, which is a major tributary of the Millers River. Athol Daily News file

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ATHOL – A decision handed down last week by Rebecca Tepper, the state’s new Secretary of Energy and Environmental Affairs, is being applauded by the coalition fighting expansion of the wastewater sludge landfill in Gardner.

An Environmental Notification Form Certificate posted Feb. 14 orders the City of Gardner to submit an Environmental Impact Report (EIR) for the proposed expansion. The ruling came in the wake of a public comment period that closed on Jan. 31.

Ivan Ussach, executive director of the Millers River Watershed Council (MRWC), told the Athol Daily News that the EEA’s decisions should slow the city’s efforts to get expansion underway.

“There’s no question that the requirement for the EIR will definitely require a substantial amount of time and effort,” he said. “I don’t know for sure what that means; it could be six months, it could be more, it could be less. It depends on how the city goes about the process. They have to figure out the financing, then they have to get someone on board.

“We certainly see this as not only a validation, if you will, of our ongoing call to find a better alternative, but also—on a practical level—I think the additional time will allow some of the other opportunities that are in play to develop further.”

The opportunities referenced by Ussach are the alternatives to expansion the coalition has been urging the city to consider. For example, the Fitchburg anaerobic digestion plant, which appears to be moving ahead, will have to be given a much more serious look, he said. Another option is the

SoMax Bioenergy/Borough of Phoenixville wastewater treatment project under development in Pennsylvania.

“That project is currently happening with (SoMax’s) HTC technology – hydrothermal carbonization—which could be an excellent model,” he said. “So, as a rough timeline, over the next six to twelve months, we could see significant developments in those projects. There may be other things as well. So, we think the situation bodes well for the opportunity for finding an alternative to become much more likely.”

Kelsy Wentling, Massachusetts River Steward at the Connecticut River Conservancy (CRC), was among those who weighed in during the public comment period.

“An EIR is a critical step in providing the information necessary to protect the health of the Millers and Connecticut rivers,” said Wentling.

The landfill is situated near public and private drinking wells as well as the Otter River, a main tributary to the Millers River, which in turn flows into the Connecticut River near the French King Bridge on Route 2. The bridge connects the towns of Erving and Gill.

Both the MRWC and CRC are members of the Coalition for a Sustainable Alternative to the Gardner Sludge Landfill Expansion.

In a release issued following the announcement, Ussach said, “This is a tremendous victory for the people of Gardner, the surrounding environment, and the watershed. MRWC and Gardner Clean Air have been advocating for a more serious look at alternatives since 2016.”

In her decision, Tepper said the city needs to “evaluate alternatives to the continued operation of the landfill; odor and air quality impacts, including greenhouse gas emissions; potential for contamination of groundwater, including drinking water supplies; alteration to wetlands, wildlife habitat and recreational open space; and impacts to environmental justice populations.”

In drafting its EIR, that state said, the city should “establish a public involvement plan to engage nearby EJ (environmental justice) populations and the city should hold at least one public information meeting about the project before filing the DEIR.”

Ussach cautioned that not too much should be read into Tepper’s decision as to whether or not her department thinks the overall proposal to expand the landfill is a good idea.

“There’s not really a way to interpret that,” he said. “I think, in my opinion, the language of the secretary’s certificate is thoroughly plain and direct, basically saying to the city, ‘You need to do an EIR and you need to do the following things.’ I don’t particularly read it as either an endorsement of the project or a statement against the project. I think it’s thoroughly neutral on that level; that’s my interpretation, and I think that would be shared by most people.”

Moving forward, Ussach said the coalition’s initial response to Tepper’s decision “is taking a deep breath and letting the decision sink in after all of the hard work we’ve been doing, pushing for a really long time. I do think it’s important that we continue to do our best to show the viability of various alternatives to the landfill expansion.”

The Athol Daily News will be reaching out for comment from Gardner officials.

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