

Sludge landfill expansion plan delayed again - here's what the hold-up is now

Emilia Cardona

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GARDNER – Before the sludge landfill can expand, city officials are required to do an environmental impact report before a permit is approved by the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection.

City officials submitted an environmental notice in December 2022 to the MassDEP. During the review the agency collected residents' comments which raised concerns on how the expansion project could affect water quality in the area and how odors could impact those living near the landfill.

In a one-mile radius of the landfill, there are 272 homes in Gardner and Templeton, 71 private wells, two major wetlands that connect with Otter River, and three vernal pools certified by the Massachusetts Wildlife Natural Heritage & Endangered Species (NEHS) program. The pools are seasonal wetlands filled with spring rainwater and melted winter snow that provide a habitat for animals and plants that are essential to the two wetlands' ecosystems.



Alan Rousseau, co-founder of Gardner Clean Air and concerned Gardner resident, said the sludge landfill is not sustainable and will continue to burden the city if an alternative is not considered. *Emilia Cardona*

Located at 744 West St., the landfill is currently 6 acres and has four years until it reaches its maximum capacity, according to city officials. All Gardner residents' human waste is transported from the city's Wastewater Treatment Plant and dumped into the landfill after it is treated.

The city's expansion plan proposes an addition to the landfill that is 4.3 acres with two stormwater retention facilities. The total cost of the project is \$4.2 million, which includes the cost of capping the existing landfill. After the expansion is complete the landfill has 17 years until it reaches maximum capacity.

Landfill near an environmental justice community

The landfill is located outside a one-mile radius from an official environmental justice community, which led the Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs Secretary Rebecca Tepper to require a detailed environmental impact report (EIR). An environmental justice community is a neighborhood that falls in the categories of low-income, racial and ethnic minorities make up 40% of the population, 25% or more of households are not proficient in English, etc.

The Massachusetts Environmental Policy Act Office's (MEPA) environmental community protection regulation took effect on Jan. 1, 2022. This meant the sludge landfill construction plan did not have to follow the regulation, but Tepper chose to require the EIR on the project because of the close proximity to the EJ community.

Mayor Mike Nicholson said the enforced EIR will take approximately two months to complete, and they are working closely with MassDEP to get all of the required reports and open public comment periods done. The city and MassDEP are currently scheduling public meetings that soon will be advertised on the city website.

Opponents speak out: [Gardner's human waste sludge landfill is nearly full. Here's why some oppose the expansion](#)

Some Gardner residents seek alternative to sludge landfill

For many years residents neighboring the human waste landfill have complained to city officials about the odor and water contamination that the facility produces. Local

environmental organizations have also advocated for a further detailed environmental impact report and an alternative to the expansion.

Ivan Ussach, director of the Millers River Watershed Council, said the decision is a step in the right direction to get the city to invest in a more sustainable alternative to the landfill.

"For the residents of the area, this means that there is hope for the city to consider an alternative to the landfill. An alternative that would end up being much better for the city, the environment, as well as for the local economy," Ussach said. "Right now, what it means is we can all sort of take a really deep breath and catch our breath because we've been working towards this for a long time."