



PRESS-REGISTER

Landfill proposal is on fast track

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A Washington County official said contracts have been signed for a large landfill in a wildlife management area near Charity Chapel, a small town just north of the Mobile County line.

The landfill -- which would accept household waste and construction debris from all comers, including other states -- is drawing fire from some county residents.

They said county officials are trying to ram the project through even before Florida-based Advanced Disposal Services presents its proposal at a required public hearing today.

That meeting will be held at 1 p.m. in the County Courthouse in Chatom.

With another, much larger landfill proposed in recent weeks for nearby Conecuh County, opponents, including the Repton Mayor Terri Carter, have asked if some officials are attempting to change the state slogan from "Alabama the beautiful" to "Alabama the dump."

Washington County officials said they too have heard complaints from residents about the arrival of a new landfill, but the officials believe the county needs the money the facility would bring, especially because residents appear opposed to new taxes. The landfill is projected to bring the county at least \$800,000 per year.

"I've heard through the grapevine that they have petitions out here, there and everywhere, but I haven't seen one," Washington County Commissioner Hilton Robbins said.

"We've got so many roads and bridges that were falling apart, we needed a revenue source," he said. "We don't have a tax. So we needed other means of income."

Robbins said the county has already accepted about \$800,000 in fees from Advanced Disposal.

He described the public hearing as part of the approval process but said the county has signed off on the proposal, which next goes before the Alabama Department of Environmental Management for permit approval.

"It's too far along now to turn around," Robbins said. "I'm not saying it couldn't be stopped, but you'd have to turn it all around. We've signed contracts."

But those opposed to the landfill said the project does not have final approval.

"Our probate judge says it is not over by a long shot," said Richard Johnstone, fire chief in Charity Chapel, the closest municipality to the site. "But that's what the core people in Chatom who are pushing this are telling everyone. See, they don't care because it's down in the south part of the county."

Johnstone said he understood that the county was in trouble financially, but that his town shouldn't have to bear the brunt.

"We're small, I'd say around 300 people," Johnstone said. "This is being shoved down our throats because they don't think we can do anything about it."

He said most of the people who have signed his petition were under the impression it was too late to fight.

In the fall of 2006, county officials invited landfill companies to submit proposals for constructing and

operating a landfill, with the county receiving an annual "host fee," based on the volume of garbage coming into the facility.

The county selected the only bid it received, according to Mary O'Brien, chief marketing officer with Advanced Disposal, which operates eight landfills in Georgia, Florida and Alabama, including the Sunflower Landfill in Tallassee.

The company also collects residential garbage in eight Alabama counties.

"We would bring waste of our own, plus we would accept third-party volumes. We don't discriminate," O'Brien said, adding that the facility would accept nonhazardous material from anyone willing to pay the disposal fees.

O'Brien said the landfill will be built on a site previously selected by the county. That site, near the town of Charity Chapel, is owned by Riley Boykin Smith, grandson of longtime U.S. Rep. Frank Boykin, who, during his lifetime, sold a great deal of land in Washington County to industrial customers.

Smith said the land involved was under option, but he wouldn't divulge the selling price.

"It will be in part of the Frank and Rob Boykin Wildlife Management Area," Smith said. "The landfill will be 170 acres. We were contacted by the county. They were looking for an area to do this because they need some revenue, as you know. This is probably the most isolated part of the county."

Smith said his family has maintained 18,000 acres it owns there as a public hunting preserve for about 50 years. The landfill will not change the status of that area, save for "about 1 percent that will go for this."

O'Brien said the actual landfill might be about 170 acres, but "chances are we would lease significantly more acreage" for buffer areas.

"We don't have a lot to offer down here in terms of a tax base, but we do have the game management area, which they are trying to tear up," Johnstone said. "That's what brings people here. What are our children going to do after they put this here, and then in 30 or 40 years it starts leaking?"

O'Brien promised that her company would build the facility in keeping with all state and federal laws, which are designed to prevent contaminants from leaking into the environment.

She said the company had not yet made any application to state officials.

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