

LONG ISLAND / SUFFOLK

Trash talk: Residents wrinkle their noses over new dump proposal



"To me an ashfill is no different from a landfill and it's not what we're asking, which is the closure of the landfill," said Bellport civic activist Monique Fitzgerald, seen outside her home on Thursday. Credit: Newsday / Thomas A. Ferrara

By Carl MacGowan

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Updated November 1, 2020 4:33 PM

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The site of the Brookhaven Town landfill — the 270-foot-high dump that has drawn the ire of neighbors and faced fines for odor violations from state and federal regulators — could get a second life as the home of a new landfill for ash from Long Island incinerators, town officials said.

The proposed new 121-acre ashfill is one of several options being weighed as local officials forecast what some describe as a solid waste crisis that could occur when the landfill closes in 2024, when it is expected to reach capacity.

In addition to the 270-acre Brookhaven landfill on Horseblock Road in Brookhaven hamlet, a pair of ashfills owned and operated by Babylon Town also are expected to close in the next decade. The Brookhaven and Babylon facilities are among the last municipal landfills on Long Island.

Without a local ashfill, officials said, incinerated trash from four Long Island waste-to-energy plants run by Morristown, New Jersey-based Covanta would have to be trucked to landfills upstate or as far away as Ohio and Pennsylvania.



Brookhaven residents on Saturday protest against a proposed ashfill next to the town landfill in Brookhaven. Credit: Morgan Campbell

Brookhaven chief of operations Matt Miner said no decisions have been made by town officials on whether to pursue the ashfill plan. The proposal would require approval by the state Department of Environmental Conservation.

Miner said town officials could drop plans for the ashfill — officially called a regional recovery and recycling residue facility — and instead pay Covanta or private carters to truck waste off Long Island.

"You need to start that [planning] process early," Miner said in an interview. "If those wastes have to be shipped off the Island, it's going to increase costs astronomically."

Brookhaven has faced criticism from neighbors and state and federal authorities for its management of the landfill.

The landfill has been cited in recent years for violations of state odor regulations, and the town and federal Environmental Protection Agency reached a settlement this summer of federal Clean Air Act violations stemming from a 2008 incident. The town paid a \$249,000 fine.

Students, teachers, parents and others associated with the Frank P. Long Intermediate School in Bellport sued the town last year, alleging that negligence by Brookhaven officials has caused illnesses such as breathing difficulties and cancer. Brookhaven officials have denied the accusations. The case is scheduled for a Dec. 16 conference in State Supreme Court.

Neighbors said they worry that the ashfill could perpetuate problems they blame on the landfill, such as truck noise, foul odors and the leakage of gases such as methane and carbon dioxide, which can be harmful in large quantities.

"We were told that the landfill would be closed in 2024, yet there was a push for this current ashfill. I don't think that was good faith," Bellport civic activist Monique Fitzgerald said Oct. 1 during a public scoping session held by Brookhaven officials to hear residents' concerns about the project. More than a dozen people, almost all opposed to the plan, spoke at the scoping session, an early step in the preparation of a report assessing a development's potential impact on the environment.

"To me an ashfill is no different from a landfill," Fitzgerald said, "and it's not what we're asking, which is the closure of the landfill."

The Brookhaven landfill takes in about 1.1 million tons annually of ash and construction trash from towns and contractors across Long Island. About a third, or 350,000 tons, is ash from incinerators. The rest includes construction and demolition debris from contractors, street sweepings from municipalities and material dredged from waterways.

Miner said the ashfill would take about the same amount of ash as the current landfill.

Private contractors are developing separate plans to process construction and demolition debris for shipment off Long Island, officials have said.

The ashfill also would receive street sweepings and dredged material, as well as junked automobiles.

The ashfill would be built on a section of the current landfill property, on land currently used for yard waste and mulch, town officials said. It would take incinerated trash from Brookhaven, Islip, Hempstead, Smithtown and Huntington towns, which together have about 1.9 million residents. Other Long Island towns and cities ship their waste off Long Island.

Miner said the ashfill also could take ash from Babylon if officials from that town are interested.

Brookhaven officials said 88% of ash from Covanta plants is deposited in the town landfill. The remaining 12% goes to Babylon's ashfills.

Covanta officials said they would prefer a local ashfill, rather than trucking waste off Long Island. Without local landfills, trucking ash off the Island "would be more expensive," Covanta spokesperson James Regan said, adding it's too soon to estimate cost increases.

Those costs would be passed onto Covanta's municipal customers and ultimately taxpayers, Regan said.

Regan and Brookhaven officials said new technology designed to pull metals, glass and other recyclable material from trash — before and after incineration — could reduce the amount of ash that would have to be buried. Covanta's exploratory program in Pennsylvania shows the amount of recovered material could be "significant," Regan said.

Some ashfill opponents from mostly minority communities such as nearby North Bellport questioned why the new facility isn't built elsewhere in Brookhaven. About 33% of North Bellport's population of 11,593 are Hispanic, and 26% are Black.

"We have had enough of being dumped on," Brookhaven NAACP president Georgette Grier-Key said at the scoping hearing. "We cannot continue to take the smells."

Environmental activists at the hearing said violations at the landfill left them with doubts.

"We do not believe the town of Brookhaven has shown any ability to manage the current landfill," Justin Johnston of Port Jefferson said. "We have seen people getting sick. ... There are concerns that this could happen again."

Miner said in the interview that the ashfill would be safe and would cause fewer odors than the landfill. The worst landfill odors are caused by hydrogen sulfide, a byproduct of construction and demolition debris, which won't be dumped at the ashfill, he said.

"The odor issue would be significantly different," Miner said.

LI garbage

Some Long Island municipalities pay to ship their trash off Long Island, but most trash from LI households is incinerated.

- Carters haul garbage to Covanta waste-to-energy plants in Westbury, Babylon, Ronkonkoma and the Huntington-Smithtown town line, where it is incinerated to generate electricity.
- The ash is transported to landfills: 88% of ash goes to the Brookhaven landfill, and 12% goes to two ashfills run by the Town of Babylon.

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