

Activists challenge Alabama landfill policies

by Laura Johnson

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To Connie Howington, Alabama's landfill permitting process is not a mundane topic, it's an inflammatory one.

Last spring, she and at least 400 residents protested the permitting of a landfill that is slated to be developed in her home county of Conecuh, she said. But, despite their wishes, she said, the county commission approved the permit, a move that may allow developers to build a landfill there.

She and three other Conecuh County residents traveled four hours to Calhoun County Tuesday for a waste management meeting, hosted by a team of researchers from Auburn University's civil engineering department. About a dozen local stakeholders — landfill managers, a public health official and county employees — also attended the meeting, one of 12 that the university's researchers are conducting as part of a study aimed at helping Alabama determine how it will manage solid waste in the coming decades.

"The more people we get engaged in this process, the better," said Joel Hayworth, an Auburn engineering professor who is heading up the study.

The university was selected to conduct the study by the Alabama Department of Environmental Management.

"I really do believe they're taking this process quite seriously," Hayworth said. "We're taking it very seriously. Your participation in this means a lot to us."

The study has two parts. The first part seeks to determine how, or if, the state of Alabama should change its permitting process. The second part seeks to determine how Alabama should dispose of its waste in the future, said Prabhakar Clement, an Auburn civil engineering professor who is also helping with the study.

The researchers seek input from everyone — from the residents who want to completely revamp the permitting process to landfill managers who want it to change very little.

"The more input we get, the better the result will be," Hayworth said.

Under the landfill permitting process as currently written, decisions about when and where a landfill should be built largely hinge on the choices of county commissions and city councils. A landfill developer submits an application to the local government. The local government has 90 days to vote it down.

If the government fails to act, the permit is approved. The rest of the permitting process includes reviews by regional planning commissions and by the Alabama Department of Environmental Management.

Some stakeholders at the Tuesday meeting said governments should have longer to determine if they want to approve the landfill.

Some said that inaction by the local government shouldn't yield an automatic yes. Others said, on both points, the system is fine as it is.

"I think ninety days is far too short to make a decision that big," said Conecuh County resident Don Smith.

For the second part of the study, the researchers asked participants how they think Alabama should dispose of its waste in the future.

"Is there something we can do better than just putting garbage in a hole? Long term, what is going to be best for Alabama?" said Brian Anderson, an engineering professor and researcher with Auburn University.

The technology is there, Clement said, to build a landfill anywhere — even in the middle of the ocean. What the engineers need to determine, he added, is what the community needs.

Participants in Tuesday's meeting discussed the possibility of managing more waste by recycling. They talked about converting it to energy.

They also discussed some of the economic challenges the state faces in learning to manage its waste through those means in the future. Recycling some materials must become profitable, some said, before it will benefit governments to process them.

If the state continues to manage its waste as it does, we will accumulate mounds and mounds of waste in landfills like the one that is being proposed in Conecuh County, Clement said.

"Egypt left pyramids. Our country is going to leave trash mountains. Is that what we want to do?" Clement said.

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