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Seeking new landfill, waste company offers Apopka $1M

By Kevin Spear, Orlando Sentinel

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The nation's largest waste handler wants to open a full-service landfill in Apopka and is offering the city $1 million plus other incentives to host a permanent mountain of trash less than a mile from some neighborhoods.

"If we're going to take it on, we want to make it worth our while, too," said Richard Anderson, the city's chief administrative officer. "That's part of the reason we wanted a payment upfront and some guarantees that we are going to get."

Such disposal sites carry such a stigma — because of foul odors, flocks of scavenging birds, litter and heavy truck traffic — that there's only one in

each of the six counties in the Orlando area.

Houston-based Waste Management Inc. wants to convert its 150-acre Vista Landfill in South Apopka from a Class III operation, which handles landscape waste and construction debris, to a Class I landfill that accepts a variety of refuse, primarily residential and business trash but also restaurant scraps, animal carcasses and sewage sludge.

Company officials said they became interested in a conversion after homeowners on nearby McQueen Road asked Waste Management to buy their properties.

Once a rural neighborhood secluded by extensive citrus groves, the area in recent years has become surrounded by disposal basins for treated sewage, a medical-waste incinerator and a pair of landfills. An average of 90 trucks a day arrive at the Vista Landfill alone.

"The industrialization has completely engulfed us," said Henry Pearson, 65, whose family has owned his home on McQueen Road for 50 years. "We are a residential island, as I was telling my wife, in the middle of an industrial ocean. And it's time to try to move."

Pearson said owners of about 15 homes are now in talks with Houston-based Waste Management.

Anderson said City Council members will consider a draft "host agreement" between the city and Waste Management Inc. next Wednesday.

Approval of that document would give the company a green light to seek permits from the city and from state authorities to convert the Vista Landfill on Keene Road to a Class I operation. Also commonly buried in Class I landfills, though their disposal is discouraged, are hazardous household wastes such as fluorescent lights, batteries, cleaning chemicals and pesticides.

Central Florida has just six Class I landfills, with one each operating in Orange, Seminole, Osceola, Lake, Volusia and Brevard counties. All are run by county governments except the one in Osceola, which is privately owned. The Orange facility is one of the largest in the state and has enough capacity to operate for decades. In addition, Lake has a waste incinerator.

Anderson said that, after Waste Management completes the permit and application process, which could take a year, the proposal would have to go back before the City Council for public hearings and a final decision.

The host agreement "does not grant anyone anything," Anderson said. "It just says, 'If you decide to do it, here are the financial terms and other operational considerations for going forward.' "

Jeannie Economos, environmental-health coordinator for the Farmworker Association of Florida in Apopka, said the expansion of industry along Keene Road has driven down the value of McQueen Road homes, making them much more affordable for Waste Management.

"It's a classic case of environmental injustice, where they are going to pay these people very low value for their homes because they can get the land cheap," Economos said. "Those people are going to think they are getting a lot of money, but they are not going to, and they are not going to be able to buy anything."

"I can totally understand they want to get out of there because it's a horrible place to live," Economos said.

A mile north of the landfill are the unincorporated neighborhoods of South Apopka, including Lake Jewell Heights, a subdivision of 40-year-old homes. Wheatley Elementary School is slightly more than a mile from the landfill, while Apopka City Hall is slightly more than 2 miles away.

To win the city's support for the landfill conversion, Waste Management has promised to meet state standards for odor and litter control and environmental safeguards. The company also has offered incentives that include:

•A community-development donation of $1 million.

•Continuation of a $225,000-a-year "host" fee that began with the current landfill and would remain in place for what could be decades of operation for the Class I facility.

•An additional "host" fee of $2 a ton for trash brought to the landfill, which would generate an estimated $500,000 or more annually.

•A $20 "tipping" fee for garbage brought to the landfill by Apopka trucks, which would cut the city's current disposal costs about in half, for an annual savings of $500,000.

•Free dumping of "white goods," such as washers and refrigerators, for Apopka residents.

An older Waste Management landfill north of Keene Road stopped taking construction and landscape debris two years ago. That facility does not have a liner and has been linked to toxic benzene found in groundwater beneath the site, according to the state Department of Environmental Protection.

Responding to DEP concerns about that contamination, the company has agreed to install a system that removes vapors, including methane, which are suspected of contributing to the leakage of benzene into the groundwater.

The Vista Landfill, south of Keene Road, has a liner, though converting the operation to a Class I facility would require installation of a more robust and durable double liner. Waste Management also plans to capture the landfill's methane as fuel to generate electricity, an increasingly common practice in the industry.

"We are confident that the conversion of the permit to a Class I facility will not have adverse environmental or other community impacts," company spokeswoman Amy Boyson said.

Earlier this month, the city of Mascotte in south Lake County turned down a proposal by another company to build a Class I landfill near County Road 33.

To win that city's approval, project backers offered the cash-strapped community several hundred thousand dollars in incentives, a recreation complex and $1 million for construction of a sewage plant.

Waste Management also proposed starting a landfill in Mascotte but withdrew that plan last year.

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