

REAL PEOPLE—REAL STORIES

Seeking Environmental Justice

Snow Hill, NC (Greene County)

OVERVIEW

A citizens' group sued the Greene County Board of Commissioners in 1998, saying that they approved a landfill site without following proper procedures or considering alternative locations. After four years of community pressure and a NC Court of Appeals opinion in favor of the citizens' group, the Board re-voted, overturned its original decision and decided not to approve any of the proposed landfill sites. This case was the first to fall under a North Carolina statute, passed in 1999, which established a protocol for approving landfill sites within one mile of an existing facility. This situation typifies others in which rural counties are targeted for imported waste by private companies.

THE COMMUNITY

Greene County is located in eastern North Carolina and has a population of approximately 19,000 people. Fifty-two percent of the population are White and 41% are Black. Sixteen percent of families in Greene County live below the poverty line. Many people living in Greene county seek work in neighboring counties.

At the time of this case, Greene County had two functioning landfills: one construction and demolition debris landfill and one municipal solid waste landfill. The municipal solid waste landfill was closed in January 1998, five months after the County contracted with a private company to open a new one.

As the county seat, Snow Hill was the location of the official proceedings in this case, and it is located in close proximity to the proposed landfill sites mentioned in this case study. With a population of approximately

"In eastern North Carolina . . . good jobs aren't plentiful, and the counties are always looking for ways to generate revenue. And when you have large corporations coming in and shopping around for places to put a landfill, they always make it sound a lot better than it actually is for the community. I always wonder, if the landfill is such a great deal, then why don't you want to keep it in your community so *you* can profit from the income generated?"

-Community Member

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BECAUSE OUR ENVIRONMENT AFFECTS OUR HEALTH

THE COMMUNITY (continued)

1,500 people, Snow Hill has a larger proportion of Black residents (49%) than the county as a whole. Thirty-eight percent of the population in Snow Hill over the age of 25 have less than a high school education.



Castoria, the small, unincorporated town closest to Bridgers Tract, the planned site of the landfill, is located 5 miles north of Snow Hill. Schools, churches, several hog operations, and the existing county construction and demolition debris landfill are all located near the Bridgers Tract site. At least two of the nearby churches serve predominantly Black congregations, and most families in the area are classified as low-income.

THE LANDFILL

In August 1997, the Greene County Board of Commissioners signed a contract with Republic Services of North Carolina (RSNC)¹ to create a new regional solid waste landfill in the County. Greene County officials estimated that a new regional solid waste landfill would bring in approximately \$1 million per year in revenue for 30 years. This revenue would help cover the costs of a new jail and upgrades to a sewer facility. Commissioners said that taxes would have to increase by twenty percent to cover these costs if the landfill were not built.

Greene County had among the lowest rates of waste disposal per capita in the state. However, approximately 1500 tons of garbage per day from surrounding North Carolina counties, and potentially from other states, would have been disposed into the planned landfill.

Four months after the 1997 agreement, before the Board of Commissioners voted on the site, RSNC purchased a 300-acre tract of land called Bridgers Tract. This site was located near Castoria, within one mile of each of the two existing landfills.

“We all became more aware of potential problems as we started . . . visiting other landfills in neighboring counties. . . . We heard about the traffic volume and noise problems, the stench and impact on property values. Who wants to live next to a dump? . . . If we didn’t create the trash, then we shouldn’t have to be the repository for it.”

-Community Member

¹ Republic Services of North Carolina (RSNC) was originally called Addington Environmental, Inc. (AEI) but requested a name change in 2000. For simplicity, the company will be called RSNC throughout this story.

WHAT HAPPENED?

When a group of community residents learned about the proposed site, they began investigating the landfill's potential impact on the community. They met to share their findings and wrote letters to the editor of the local newspaper. They formed Greene Citizens for Responsible Growth (GCRG) to organize against the landfill. Many people in GCRG were angry because the commissioners signed a contract without community input. They also felt concerned about an increase in truck traffic, offensive odors, and the stigma of having another landfill in their community.

On October 5, 1998, the Greene County Board of Commissioners held a public hearing to discuss the landfill site. Hundreds of people attended the hearing, and the meeting lasted over three hours. The Board voted to approve the site after the hearing ended.

Shortly thereafter, GCRG sued the Board of Commissioners to prevent the construction of the landfill. GCRG said that the Board violated a 1999 North Carolina General Statute that established rules about the development of new landfills located within one mile of another landfill, such as requiring local governments to consider alternative sites and to make sure that the nearby residents are not primarily low income or people of color.



Compacting trash at a Municipal Solid Waste Landfill in North Carolina

Superior Court judges granted a temporary injunction (an order to stop what one is doing) but later denied the group's request for a long term order to stop building of the landfill.

The citizen's group appealed the decision to a higher court, and on July 5, 2001, the NC Court of Appeals reversed the previous trial court decision, sending the case back to the lower court and asking them to look at the evidence again.

"[When] our case advanced to the Court of Appeals in Raleigh, we rented a bus. We packed the bus with black and white. We went up to the court of appeals. We fully occupied the courtroom, the windowsills around the side, all the standing room, so when the justices came in, the chairman looked around and smiled, [saying], 'I've never seen so many people in this courtroom before.'"

-Community Member

BACK TO THE DRAWING BOARD

On March 4, 2002, the Board announced that it planned to re-start the landfill site selection in order to ensure a fair and open process. The company presented three possible sites to the county commissioners, including Bridger's Tract (which RSNC still owned). The waste company hired a consultant to analyze the demographic characteristics of the three sites, and the resulting report concluded that only one of the proposed sites was near residents that had low incomes. Soon afterwards, researchers at the University of North Carolina reviewed the report and found errors with the way that the analysis had been conducted. They provided a letter to attorneys for the citizen group that stated that the study was flawed.

The Greene County Board of Commissioners voted on the new landfill sites on February 3, 2003. The Board had the option of: 1) selecting one of the three

sites for the landfill, or 2) not selecting any of the sites.

In a 3-1 vote, the Board opted not to select any of the proposed landfill sites.

"Don't take no for an answer. There is always a way out of a problem, but be prepared for the amount of emotional, financial, and physical time you may have to put towards solving a problem. I don't think any of us realized that we would be involved in this thing for so many years.."

-Community Member



Trucks waiting to enter landfill area

This is part of a series of stories about how communities in North Carolina have faced environmental justice concerns. Sources include articles from *The News & Observer* (Raleigh, NC) and interviews with community members. A longer version with references is available on our website. Published June, 2006.



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