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Slidell landfill to stay open

DEQ alters permit for contested dump

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In a move that shocked many Slidell area residents and St. Tammany Parish officials, the state Department of Environmental Quality on Wednesday approved a permit modification that will allow the controversial Slidell Landfill to continue accepting construction and demolition debris until Jan. 31, 2010.

"I just cannot believe this," said Oak Harbor resident Sandy Fauchaux, a leader in a months-long fight to close the 310 Howze Beach Road facility owned by businessman Chris Jean. "This is an absolute travesty against the people of St. Tammany Parish. . . . They have absolutely no respect for the people's health and welfare and no respect for the wishes of the public or their quality of life."

Parish President Kevin Davis also said he was surprised by the decision. "This goes to show you that this was strictly a DEQ decision, and we never really had a say in it," Davis said. "I've been against the permit application and went on record to that."

Parish Councilman Jerry Binder of Slidell shrugged in disbelief when told of the decision. "The Parish Council is against it," Binder said. "The parish president is against it. And they're for it."

A fuming Councilman Joe "Coach" Thomas, who represents the area where the landfill is located, declined to comment. "You don't want to hear my . . . comment," he said.

Under emergency declarations issued by the DEQ since Katrina, Slidell Landfill has been allowed to exceed its permit, which limits the height of debris in operating pits to about 15 feet. Because of the declarations, a mound of debris at the landfill has grown to more than 60 feet.

Nearly double in size

But the DEQ last week removed Slidell Landfill from its latest declaration, which meant the facility would have to close by April 20 unless the state agency approved a pending permit modification requested by the company.

That modification was approved Wednesday. The revised permit will allow debris at the landfill to reach 65 feet, which DEQ officials say is the existing height of debris there now. The landfill also will be able to expand from 28 to 48 acres onto an abutting old landfill that operated from the late 1980s to April 2002.

The DEQ said the permit revision will allow the facility "sufficient time to reach proper grades and slopes for the purpose of (permanent) closure and for the parish to find an alternate disposal site for construction and

demolition debris generated in the parish."

The agency set a firm closure date of Jan. 31, 2010, for the landfill, a move DEQ Assistant Secretary Chuck Brown called "unique." The facility will have to close on that date, even if it has not reached its capacity or limits of its revised permit, he said. If the limits are reached before then, the landfill will have to close before that date, he said.

Slidell Landfill originally asked for a permit revision that would allow debris to reach 125 feet in the center. But after public outcries over a "mountain of debris" near a major entrance into St. Tammany, the company amended its request to a maximum height of 85 feet.

In issuing the new permit, the DEQ reduced the maximum height to 65 feet. It also requires Slidell Landfill to have at least two monitors to ensure that only materials allowed by state regulations are dumped at the site.

Brown said the DEQ evaluated all concerns raised by residents and its decision to approve the permit was based on "technical merit." For example, he said concerns were raised about groundwater pollution from the facility. The deepest disposal pit at the landfill is 22 feet, and the shallowest water well in the vicinity is 122 feet, he said. Therefore the threat for groundwater contamination "is almost zero," he said.

Legal action possible

Some neighbors remain unconvinced. Oak Harbor resident Wayne Collier said opponents might be convinced if the landfill or DEQ would post a bond guaranteeing no one will get sick from the facility.

Collier said opponents will continue their fight to close the facility and will consider options that include legal action. "We will regroup to consider what we will do," he said.

In a written "basis for decision" to approve the permit, Brown said the landfill has adequate measures to protect the environment.

"The operational and permitting requirements help minimize the potential impact" on the environment, Brown wrote. "Slidell Landfill provides services to the construction community and to the residents of St. Tammany (who) are in the process of rebuilding as well as providing a means for disposal of hurricane-generated debris."

Slidell Landfill, the only construction-and-debris-disposal site in the parish with a permanent permit, "offers a means of lowering disposal and transportation costs, reducing illegal dumping, providing services in emergencies and disasters, and stimulating the local economy," Brown said.

Brown said the DEQ determined that approving the permit "is necessary for Louisiana to safely reduce, transport, manage and dispose of these wastes. Furthermore, the department finds no additional device, system or procedure that would provide any greater environmental protection than that which is presently incorporated in the design and permit requirements of the facility."

Keeping the facility open, he said, is "a preferred alternative" to approving a permit for a new landfill in the parish to handle construction and demolition debris.

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