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# Our regional landfill is filling up fast. Where can our trash go?



SPSA's landfill in Suffolk is filling up. Capacity may be met in roughly 10 years. As seen Thursday, March 7, 2024. (Stephen M. Katz/The Virginian-Pilot)



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The challenge is twofold.

The landfill is facing an uphill regulatory challenge to expand its capacity, according to Dennis Bagley, executive director of the Southeastern Public Service Authority.

Meanwhile, a facility that burns up to 70% of waste destined for the landfill and converts it into energy is closing in June and has already dialed back how much waste it's burning. The reduction in capacity means the landfill is receiving over 500 more tons of waste daily, though the figure fluctuates.

Landfill portions that were planned to be full by early 2028 will now be full by December 2026. Bagley said if the SPSA is unable to get the next planned landfill cells permitted, the Suffolk landfill will be entirely out space in the next dozen years.

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## The capacity problem

SPSA handled 761,000 tons of commercial and municipal waste in the last fiscal year, including trash from the cities of Chesapeake, Norfolk, Portsmouth, Suffolk and Virginia Beach.

Much of the trash collected had been taken to the WIN Waste plant, formerly known as the Wheelabrator facility, where it was burned to create energy that was then sold to the adjoining Norfolk Naval Shipyard. The plant had a contract to burn SPSA trash through at least 2027. It was working well, burning about 70% of the region's trash and only sending 30% to the landfill, according to Bagley. At least [until a fire at the facility](#) in 2022 reduced its capacity, and as operations wind down at the site.

The plant is set to close in a few months. The Navy [decided to find a source of its own energy](#), and built two natural gas-powered turbines capable of generating its own steam power. With the Navy's new source of power, it did not renew its contract to buy steam from the Portsmouth plant after June.

Now all the trash will have to be diverted to the landfill.

"What do we do with the other 1,400 tons a day that they can't process that they've been processing and we've been planning for that's coming to the landfill?" Bagley said. "Landfills have a definite amount of life in them and we can't put but so much in there."



A bald eagle perched above working machinery at the top of SPSA's landfill in Suffolk. Officials are concerned that capacity may be met in roughly 10 years. As seen Thursday, March 7, 2024. (Stephen M. Katz/The Virginian-Pilot)

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One option would be for the landfill to expand capacity. SPSA has been working on opening up new “cells” – the portions of a landfill where the trash is layered with materials to mitigate the environmental impact. But Bagley said the Environmental Protection Agency does not seem interested in letting landfills open up new land for pits. SPSA has sought to put multiple other planned cells into a permanent preservation easement that would bar them from being turned into cells in order to get at least the next two cells permitted, according to Bagley.

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## Other options

To find a solution, Bagley is asking Hampton Roads localities to band together and consider nontraditional waste disposal options.

In response to SPSA's previous requests for information, he said companies sent proposals that outlined the potential to dispose of the region's waste by burning it for jet fuel, or breaking down waste through anaerobic digestion, among other

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Now, the SPSA has [put out a request for proposal](#) seeking bids from companies to process, recycle, reuse and/or dispose of 100% of the region's waste. SPSA is expecting to get 10 proposals back. Those proposals will be evaluated based on the cost to process the waste per ton to make sure the finances are viable for both the company and SPSA, according to Bagley.

Bagley said he is not asking localities that belong to the SPSA for money, but rather commitments to remain part of the regional waste authority for 20 years. If all the member localities remain committed, he said it will increase the financial feasibility of any future contracts for waste disposal. That way, waste from member localities — including Virginia Beach, Norfolk, Portsmouth, Suffolk and Chesapeake — could be diverted to companies that might create value from the waste instead of just dumping it in the Suffolk landfill.



Dennis Bagley, SPSA executive director, points out the renewable natural gas facility and leachate ponds behind their Suffolk landfill. As seen Thursday, March 7, 2024. (Stephen M. Katz/The Virginian-Pilot)

“I just need (the cities’) commitment to go forward with a deal that’s going to allow these companies to come in and get the money and the capital they need to build these plants,” Bagley said.

SPSA’s philosophy is to put as little in the landfill as possible because that way it can use the site for as long as possible. Bagley said the closer it gets to being filled, the



## Past operations

The landfill can trace its roots back to the 1970s when there were plans for a regional water authority. The water plan fell apart at that time, but a waste authority, SPSA, came out of those talks, according to Bagley.

It started to buy land along Route 58 in Suffolk and expanded, even including a special state-level carve-out for it and Danville to expand as regulations changed in the 1990s. Plans called for the total footprint of the landfill to be able to last until at least the 2100s based on the volume of waste in the 1980s with calculations based on growth of the region. Yet, the EPA has not been enthusiastic about permitting any more landfills and a search for a new regional landfill was unsuccessful, Bagley said.

The Portsmouth waste burning plant played into the calculations of how much space and time the landfill would have, according to Bagley. Wheelabrator, now called WIN Waste, bought the plant from SPSA in 2010 and there were no previous plans to eventually close or wind down operations, according to WIN Waste.

“At peak operation, the facility can process 691,226 tons of waste while producing 330,513 (megawatts) of power per day,” WIN Waste said in a statement. “That’s about 1,894 tons of waste converted to renewable energy every day.”

Two years ago, the plant processed around 505,000 tons of waste, about 1,382 tons a day. So far this year, it has processed about half as much – almost 57,000 tons – or about 777 a day, according to WIN Waste.



SPSA's landfill in Suffolk is filling up. Capacity may be met in roughly 10 years. As seen

The energy plant’s burned waste is brought by the truckload to the landfill. That ash is about 30% the size and weight of the original waste, representing a huge decrease in how much trash goes into the landfill, Bagley said.

Ash can be used as cover in the landfill, following the WIN Waste fire in 2022, the landfill has been receiving lower quality ash that is not fully burned. As a result, that poorly burnt ash must be dumped into the landfill with the rest of the trash, Bagley said.

After the plant closes in June, it will be demolished and the site will be remediated, according to WIN Waste.

“I’ll be pushing daisies when this landfill is at capacity even with all the waste here, but the fact of the matter is somebody’s got to deal with this,” he said. “Somebody’s got to deal with the nation’s waste problem and I want it to be us.”

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