

London Grove residents support SECCRA expansion

■ After constituents learned the pros and cons, support increased from 55 percent to 64 percent

By Maria J.S. Bednarz

An independent poll shows that most London Grove residents support an expansion of the Southeastern Chester County Refuse Authority's (SECCRA) landfill.

During a press conference Monday, Jim Lee, president of Susquehanna Polling and Research in Harrisburg, discussed the results of a telephone

survey of 250 London Grove residents that was conducted in May.

Residents were asked whether they supported expansion of the landfill so that it can continue to accept trash from its member municipalities beyond 2009.

They support the expansion of the landfill by just above two to one; 55 percent support it,

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while 26 percent oppose it, Lee said.

The response is significant because the question was posed before respondents were given the key arguments about why the expansion is necessary, he said, so the answers are objective.

Additionally, 41 percent view SECCRA favorably, and eight percent see it as unfavorable, Lee said. Also, 59 percent of respondents gave SECCRA an excellent or good rating in disposing of residents' trash safely and responsibly, while one percent gave it a poor rating.

"It's such good news. It's very encouraging when...you get this positive reinforcement that you're doing a good job," said SECCRA manager Bill Stullken. "We need to get the message to the supervisors that we're part of the solution. We're not part of the problem."

The Refuse Authority's board of directors commissioned Susquehanna Polling and Research to conduct the poll.

"We wanted to get the most accurate reading we could about

how London Grove constituents felt about SECCRA," said Rick Cairnes, SECCRA Board of Directors Chairman.

London Grove supervisors denied SECCRA's application to expand the landfill two years ago, Stullken said. They turned down SECCRA's plan at the zoning board level, as the landfill would require a zoning variance, and at the conditional use hearing, he said.

"The township prevailed in both and in appeals of the original decision," Cairnes said.

Consequently the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) rejected SECCRA's permit for the expansion, he said.

"The DEP will not process a permit application where they are aware there is conflict between the landfill and the host municipality, so at the moment we have to do a better job of informing...the supervisors [of] the value of this facility in their community," Stullken said.

SECCRA will provide the poll results to London Grove supervisors to make them aware of the township's support for SECCRA and for the additional landfill in hopes to encourage them to not only approve the expansion, but to see how it would benefit the community,

Stullken said.

London Grove is the only township that does not support the expansion; the other 23 member municipalities have adopted resolutions that support the new landfill, Cairnes said.

The proposed expansion would be constructed on a 37-acre parcel that is adjacent to the existing landfill, Stullken said. Using the site, which SECCRA owns, for an additional landfill has been part of SECCRA's expansion plan for 10 years.

According to the latest projections, the existing landfill will reach capacity in 2010 or 2011, Stullken said. The expansion would allow SECCRA to continue servicing southern Chester County for another 10 years, he said.

If the expansion is not approved, waste from SECCRA's 24 member municipalities, which include the Avon Grove area, would have to be carted to another site, costing those municipalities' residents to pay more for waste processing.

"The community needs its waste managed somewhere, some way," Stullken said. "We think it's appropriate to use this facility."

Moving the landfill would not be feasible, as \$12 million has

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been invested in the existing site.

"You simply can't abandon an investment like that," he said.

"There are items that have decades of useful life that we

would have to replicate at a different facility."

Building on the existing landfills vertically is not an option either because DEP requirements and local ordinance limitations would not allow it, Cairnes said.

The survey has a six percent margin of error and a 95 percent confidence level, Lee said.

The group surveyed represents all the demographic groups, including Republicans and Democrats, men and women, voters in different age groups, and those in the Chatham and South sections of town, Lee said. Residents from all areas of the township were represented proportionately based on where the population is concentrated.

After hearing arguments for and against the expansion and its impacts, support for the expansion increased to 64 percent, while opposition dropped to 18 percent, he said.

For example, when respondents were told the landfill accepts trash exclusively from SECCRA's 24 member communities, 70 percent said they were more likely to support an expansion, and 10 percent said they were less likely to support it. When they were told the landfill had never been cited for environmental violations involving odor, litter, noise or air or water quality, 73 percent responded they were more likely to support an expansion, he said.

Sixty-eight percent said they were more likely to support an expansion after they were told that if the landfill were forced to close, London Grove would lose contribution fees and closure would impact real estate taxes.

While residents agreed with the arguments for expansion of the landfill, they disagreed with the arguments against the expansion.

Specifically, 80 percent agree that if the landfill closes residents' trash collection costs will increase and 64 percent agree that illegal dumping will increase. At the same time, 58 percent disagree that expanding the landfill will increase development and traffic congestion in the township, and 56 percent disagree that it will reduce the residents' quality of life, Lee