

SECCRA poll favors landfill expansion

By Sara Beth A. Reyburn and
Carla Lucas

Although London Grove Township has twice defeated the Southeastern Chester County Refuse Authority's (SECCRA) landfill expansion plans in a court of law, public opinion favors the expansion, said SECCRA representatives on July 10.

SECCRA released the results of a random telephone poll taken of township residents that was conducted by Susquehanna Polling and Research. James Lee, president of the Harrisburg-based survey research and public opinion polling firm, said the poll showed three main points: SECCRA has a positive image in the township, residents support the landfill expansion, and residents agree with the arguments in favor of expansion, while rejecting the primary criticisms.

"SECCRA not only has a good public image in the township and is generally regarded as a good neighbor, but is also viewed as doing an above-average job running its landfill," said Lee.

The poll revealed, Lee said, that 59 percent of London Grove residents believe SECCRA is doing an excellent or good job of disposing of trash in a safe and responsible manner. He also said residents articulated specific reasons why they hold a positive view of SECCRA.

A 38-year-old non-profit municipal authority with a publicly appointed board of directors, SECCRA provides solid waste disposal and recycling for approximately 90,000 residents in southern Chester County. It has operated a landfill for 20 years in London Grove Township, and prior to that operated a landfill in Kennett Square that is now Anson B. Nixon Park.

SECCRA anticipates the current landfill will reach capacity in 2009, unless it is permitted to expand. Officials said they

believed the other 23 member municipalities of SECCRA support expansion of the current landfill site, but London Grove does not. The state Department of Environmental Protection will not issue SECCRA an expansion permit because of London Grove, the host municipality, opposes the expansion.

Bill Stullken, general manager of SECCRA, said the expansion has been in the planning stages for more than 10 years and the plans call for increasing the landfill facility on within its current area. "The community needs its waste managed somewhere and if we go somewhere else, it's going to be more expensive," he said. Moving the landfill to another site, Stullken said, would involve forfeiting an investment at the current site of up to \$12 million in land and facilities, such as storm water management devices and monitoring wells. Expanding the current landfill could add between 10 and 40 years of additional capacity.

"We felt it (the poll) was information we needed for our strategic planning purposes," said Rick Cairns, chair of SECCRA's board of directors. "If it encourages residents to support our plans, that would be a great secondary benefit."

Lee said poll respondents indicated support for expanding the landfill by a margin of 55 percent to 26 percent. "This more than two-to-one ratio of support is significant because it's an objective snapshot of public opinion before respondents are presented with key arguments about why the landfill expansion is necessary and in the best interests of township residents," said Lee.

He said resident support of the expansion increased when they were presented with the key arguments purported in favor of the expansion, with 70 percent of respondents saying they were more likely to support expansion when told SECCRA accepts waste only

from its member municipalities, and 73 percent more likely to support it when told SECCRA has never been cited for environmental violations.

In addition, the poll revealed residents disagreed with the arguments raised in opposition to the expansion, with 58 percent disagreeing with the claim that expansion would increase growth, development and traffic, and 56 percent disagreeing that expansion would lessen the quality of life in the township. Resident support for expanding the landfill was consistent across demographic lines, Lee said, although there was less support from a small number of respondents who said they lived within one mile of the landfill.

SECCRA planned to forward the results to the township supervisors. "At the moment, we have to do a better job of informing and encouraging the supervisors to understand the value of this facility in their community," said Cairns.

Susquehanna Polling conducted the poll during May, testing the attitudes and opinions about SECCRA and its future landfill expansion plans. Lee said the poll has a margin of error of plus or minus 6.1 percent at the 95 percent confidence level. He said the respondents were not told that SECCRA was the sponsor of the poll, and questions were asked in an order to gauge their honest opinions about several organizations in general before focusing on SECCRA and the landfill expansion.

"It was a lame, biased poll; not a complete poll, a one-sided poll," said Tom Houghton, chair of London Grove Township's board of supervisors, who said some residents surveyed in the poll had contacted him. "It didn't discuss how high the expansion (140-feet above grade) would be and how long (until 2027) the landfill will stay in London Grove Township. If we (the opposition) conducted the poll, we'd get opposite numbers."