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## **N.C. may soon be a trash magnet**

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The cheap land, low costs and central location drawing northeastern transplants to North Carolina are turning out to be an attractive lure for their garbage, too.

Five proposed mega-landfills seeking permits stand out not only for their size -- up to three times larger than the biggest one now operating -- but for the amount of trash they would attract from other states.

The garbage they're estimated to bring in, at least 4 million tons a year, could make North Carolina the nation's fourth-largest waste importer.

North Carolina exports 10 pounds of solid waste for every pound it imports. The state says three of the new landfills alone would reverse that ratio -- to 4 pounds coming in for every pound going out.

The proposals, which still need government approval, have raised a stink in the rural counties the waste haulers are courting. Cash-strapped counties would make a windfall of millions of dollars a year in fees.

But nobody wants garbage as a neighbor, especially when its return address is out of state.

Waste companies, said one industry official, are looking for large tracts of land with good transportation networks "and as few voters as possible."

Making North Carolina even more attractive to waste companies is its lack of state disposal fees. Twenty-six states impose fees ranging from 25 cents to \$8.75 a ton.

The biggest of the proposed landfills, in the state's table-flat northeastern corner, would eventually form a mountain of garbage 280 feet tall.

Southeast of Charlotte, in the state's lower midsection, Richmond and neighboring Scotland counties are competing for a regional landfill that would take waste from Maine to Florida. North Carolina would supply more than half its 5,000 tons, or 250 truckloads, a day, says the developer, Waste Management Inc.

Both counties have taken steps toward granting a garbage-hauling franchise, approving it in the first of two required commissioners' votes. That's despite Waste Management not revealing where it wants to build in either county.

Construction, operating and closing costs, along with transportation expenses, largely determine where landfills may be built, said Greg Peverall, Waste Management's project consultant. The company is also seeking federal and state approval for a 1,500-ton-a-day regional landfill near the state's southern coast in Columbus County.

Future Interstates 73 and 74 will provide easy access for trucks to Richmond County.

But a 400-acre landfill would kill the economic development the highways promise, said Svea Strong, co-chair of a newly formed citizens group fighting the project. She fears her rural area will prove irresistible to waste companies.

"We believe if they put in a landfill in Scotland County, it won't be long before they come knocking in Richmond," she said, "because they're land-hungry."

Richmond County's estimated take -- \$4 million a year in fees and disposal savings -- equals 16 cents on the property tax rate. That's significant in a county that needs a new courthouse and jail complex, expected to cost \$42 million, said county manager Jim Haynes.

Big new landfills follow a nationwide trend. The number of active landfills has dropped by three-fourths since the late 1980s, federal figures show, while average sizes have increased.

Government oversight also has tightened. Since 1998, municipal landfills have been required to use liners to catch polluted "garbage juice," catch methane gas from rotting waste and monitor groundwater.

But the coastal sites eyed for four of the proposed N.C. landfills are close to surface and groundwater that critics say could become contaminated.

State regulations don't consider factors like landfill noise and truck traffic, said John Runkle, a Chapel Hill lawyer representing landfill opponents in several counties.

"The biggest flaw is that they don't actually look at the real people who live around these landfills," he said. "It's the people and property values that nobody considers."

Local ordinances, however, sometimes require those assessments. Comprehensive site-suitability studies, done by the state, also examine many community concerns, the N.C. Division of Waste Management says.

The state has a desperate need for more landfill space, said the division's Paul Crissman, especially around its largest cities. Mecklenburg leads all N.C. counties in waste per person, and the new landfill it opened near the S.C. line five years ago "could fill up in a hurry," Crissman said.

North Carolina's 540 recycling businesses are hungry to handle more material and could slow the flow of N.C. trash to landfills, said Scott Mouw of the state pollution-prevention office.

In tiny Camden County, trucks would haul to a new landfill up to 10,000 tons of trash a day from northeastern North Carolina, Tidewater Virginia and, by barge or train, other East Coast states. That 3 million tons a year is triple the amount taken in at the state's largest existing landfill, near Lowe's Motor Speedway.

Camden expects to earn up to \$4 million a year in fees, adding 40 percent to its operating budget. With nearly 10,000 residents and newcomers spilling across the county line from metro Hampton Roads, Va., county commissioners had to raise taxes 15 cents this year just to build one elementary school.

"It's just a difficult situation you find yourselves in," county manager Randell Woodruff said of the need for money.

And Camden County has no easy answer: Local opponents and Chesapeake, Va., just across the state line, sued the county and the landfill developers last month.

### **Approval Process**

*The typical steps in getting a landfill approval:*

- County commissioners award franchise allowing waste company to operate there. Two separate votes required.
- Permit requested from state Division of Waste Management. State does a site-suitability study.
- In some locations, state and federal review and approval of the landfill's potential impact on water quality is required.
- County commissioners give final approval after all state and federal approvals are in hand.

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