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A Scents-ible Way to Address Landfill Complaints

Complaints about odor from the Ontario County Landfill operated by Casella Waste and the Seneca Meadows Landfill are not new. Yet elected officials from both Ontario and Seneca County seem at a loss about what to do to bring the issue under control.

Jackie Augustine and Jeff Henderson, the local duo behind the Seneca7 running relay, are convinced that knowledge is power and knowledge comes from good data. Combining their backgrounds in public policy and software engineering they are launching an online service meant to better capture the frequency and range of landfill odors. Currently, supervisors in both counties receive reports from the landfill management firms about odor complaints received on phone lines that the companies manage themselves. “Not only do I see that set-up as a problem,” says Augustine “but I think the system itself discourages people from registering their complaint.” She was reminded of her time on Geneva’s City Council when residents near Hobart and William Smith Colleges would decline to file formal noise or vandalism complaints because there hadn’t been follow-up on prior incidents. “It’s bad enough if an issue doesn’t get resolved; it’s even worse if you aren’t confident the issue was even recorded. Who’s monitoring the paper trail?”

A few nights ago Augustine opened the door to let the dog out, only to be met with an overpowering landfill stench. She called Casella’s complaint line but was put on a long hold. She tried to use the new online form that Casella put on the County’s website, but was disappointed that the form didn’t even collect basic information like the location of the smell. “I told Jeff there’s got to be a better way to not just collect the information but confirm that it is received and taken seriously. Right now, it stinks, in every sense of the word.” A new idea was born.

Henderson, who has developed event registration and real-time tracking software for commercial use, as well as database, invoicing, and email applications for community projects, set out to construct a system that would meet multiple objectives. First, they wanted to make the process as easy as possible for people who smell a landfill odor. Second, they wanted to make sure the complaint would be logged appropriately so that the supervisors and the DEC would have complete and accurate data. Third, they wanted people to have confirmation that their complaint had been registered. “Visualization is key,” says Henderson. “If you can submit your complaint online and get immediate confirmation that it was received as you intended it, that’s going to improve your confidence in the system overall and generate a better dataset for elected officials to use in their decision-making.”

They are serious about giving the community a picture of the odor problem. They have established the website www.ItStinks.org to allow anyone who detects a landfill odor to place a virtual pin on a map, which automatically records the location and time of the incident. The complaint generates an email to elected officials in that jurisdiction, alerting them to the ongoing problem. There is an option to add more details, such as contact information or other comments, as part of the complaint. The virtual pins are added to a map on the website that continually updates to display complaints over time. They also

plan to make periodic reports to government entities and groups such as Finger Lakes Zero Waste to make sure that these complaints are being heard.

“Democracy should be direct and responsive,” says Henderson. “A few clicks and you’ve had your say and made sure it was heard. It’s going to be hard for the powers that be to ignore this.”