

Environmental Considerations Somerville Landfill Redevelopment Zone

The Somerville Landfill Redevelopment Zone consists of a number of adjoining properties owned by a number of entities and encompasses approximately 160 acres in total.

The majority of land in this zone has been occupied for many years mainly by various commercial businesses, railway operations and of course the borough municipal landfill.

These uses imply that the ground must be contaminated; and it is; we have to learn what the contaminants are and how invasive they have become. Before detailing the current environmental testing taking place, let's look at the overall situation.

New Jersey Transit owns and operates the Raritan Valley railway line, it also owns other land in the zone, all of which dates back to the Central Railway of New Jersey, the majority of this land is adjacent to the current Railway station and runs parallel to Veterans Memorial Highway; one other piece cuts diagonally across the site and at one time the railway crossed Rt 206 just north of the bridge over the Raritan River. There were also switching sidings plus engine and car cleaning yards behind the current station location. Are these properties contaminated? The short answer is, most probably; however the type and amount of substances should not be a great problem, the types of potential substances left behind by railway operations is known. We will most likely find, lubricating oils, cleaning solvents, coal or coke cinders from engine fire-boxes, rail ties and other materials consistent with these operations. The clean-up will most likely mean the removal of these substances and replacing them with certified clean fill, (clean soil), this is a know process and not hard to achieve but it is a costly one.

There are a number of other privately owned properties within the Landfill Redevelopment Zone, some may have minor contamination issues, others have had and are in the process of being cleaned-up now.

In addition to the above, the landfill operated in a time where regulation and environmental impacts were not as stringent as they now are. In many cases the effect of various compounds in use in the mid 50's and 60's was not fully understood. The result of this was and remains that there are unknown contents of the landfill. Case in point would be that during the time of operation it has been reported that many household appliances and other hard waste were regularly disposed of in the landfill, this is not uncommon with these types of properties and again the engineering exists to resolve the specific findings.

During the last 20 years there have been a number of environmental studies conducted on the site, primarily the borough owned landfill proper, not so much the adjoining properties. For a variety of reasons, foremost being increasingly stringent DEP regulations and secondarily the extent of the testing, these studies and findings can only provide guidance to further testing and clean-up (remediation) planning.

Before continuing, we must make one point very clear; the ultimate remediation of the site will be dependant on what is planned to be built on it. Should the remediation be planned in isolation without any consideration to the various land uses proposed (or ultimately approved) for the site the cost would make the project completely prohibitive. Using costs derived from other New Jersey landfill clean-up projects we can use a base-line cost of \$200,000 per acre to clean; if 100 acres have to be remediated the total for the clean-up alone is \$20,000,000. Should clean-up be attempted prior to any land use planning has taken place this cost could at the very least double to \$40,000,000, please remember these are examples based on other completed projects, not hard numbers specific to Somerville.

The Borough has embarked on a proactive and forward thinking process that will encourage potential redevelopers to work with us to achieve our goals and through this help them to achieve their own goals.

In preparation to preparing the documents asking potential developers to submit concept plan for the redevelopment of the landfill, called a Request for Proposals (RFP) we have initiated two initiatives that will help us provide a great amount of detail and direction to those developers that do submit proposals.

The first initiative is a Public Vision Planning project that has been underway for a little over a year, commencing in the second half of 2005 and in conjunction with NJ Transit and the New Jersey Economic Development Authority who funded the project we have been working towards the creation of a realistic, workable and publicly supported vision for the eventual redevelopment of the site. When complete this will provide guidance to developing land-use ordinances, bulk density requirements, open space and green space allocations and a lot more.

The second initiative is conducting an environmental characterization of the landfill; this is the first step in defining the potential clean-up requirements and cost. Funded in part by the Somerset County Economic Development Incentive Program and the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection the end result of this characterization will be a thorough understanding of the contents of the landfill and a mapping of its real physical boundaries. This study will also define any major contaminants present and will become the basis for redevelopers to create a comprehensive remediation plan for the site. This study is ongoing and is expected to be complete on or around the end of the year; weather permitting.

Taking the forgoing into account, the borough has been very active in “getting the project going”, in a planned, deliberate and open manner, you should be reading this on the borough web-site.

When a developer has the visioning information and the environmental characterization report they will be able to prepare a proposal that addresses the needs and requirements of the community, in addition they will be able to “guestimate” the potential clean-up cost and dovetail these into the overall land preparation cost for the project.

It is expected that due to the size of the landfill zone, its topography and its contents the clean-up will involve some tried and true methods as well as some innovative and newer engineering methods to ensure this project will compliment the borough and contribute to the quality of life and fabric of the community for the foreseeable future.