

As I See It: Kicking the (trash) can down the road

BECKY MERJA Aug 16, 2022 Updated Aug 20, 2022

Corvallis, Benton County, is literally the “heart of the (Willamette) valley,” known for its fertile soil, clean air and water quality.

If you value these things about our county, you will understand why North Benton County residents have been worried about the Coffin Butte Landfill.

Here is a quote from a letter written in opposition to landfill expansion:

“Although the date of closing the present operations has been delayed time after time, the people felt the commitment was made in good faith and therefore have demonstrated patience, tolerance and understanding concerning the difficulties entailed in finding an alternate site.”

Was that from the 2021 expansion request ... which would have covered over Coffin Butte Road with a 270-foot-tall mountain of garbage, blocking essential emergency access?

It was not.

Was it from the 2003 expansion ... when the landfill added another 20 or so acres, and promised that by doing so, the county extended the estimated life of the landfill until the year 2070?

It was not.

Was it from the 1983 request by the dump applicant to amend the code to add a new “landfill” zone where one of the promises included a requirement that landfill operations be screened so that they “ ... cannot be seen from the county road or adjacent properties?”

It was not.

No, that letter, from the North Benton Advisory Committee, is dated Nov. 5, 1973.

Promises broken

Even back in 1973, the dump was controversial. North Benton County residents had been repeatedly promised that it would be closed. Because there had been little planning for where trash would go after closure, an expansion was approved as an emergency stopgap (sound familiar?).

To win over residents, the dump was mandated to serve only two small areas outside our county’s boundaries, to close by the year 2000 (it was to be made obsolete by a waste-to-energy

facility), and volumes were to be small (88,000 tons). Traffic was a negligible 30 to 40 vehicles per day.

And of course, there was the requirement that landfill operations, again, not be seen. Today, the landfill is visible from many locations in North Albany and along Independence Highway.

Volumes have grown 1,250% from the date of the letter quoted above in 1973; currently Republic Services is limited to hauling in 1,100,000 tons a year. If another expansion, any expansion at all, is approved, that cap is removed. That means there would be no limit to the amount of waste or the sources of waste that Republic Services can haul into our county.

The increase in waste also relates to more trucks on our roads, increasing wear and tear and decreasing safety of the highways, more roadside trash. That the landfill many times had promised that the operations would not be seen means nothing.

Back in 1973, North Benton County had reason to be worried. Now all of Benton County has reason to worry. The corporate policy of Republic Services (an Arizona corporation), which acquired the landfill, is continuous expansion to match incoming volumes. That means that we could be looking at an expansion on the order of last year's request every nine years or so.

What comes next?

Benton County has been kicking this can down the road for 45 years, allowing repeated incremental expansions without considering the long-term impacts for our county.

Now that the county commissioners have finally taken a step back and authorized a work group to look at the long-term perspective, we can hope for an outcome that will be in the best interests of Benton County's residents, now and for future generations.

Becky Merja was Corvallis' first city forester, with a 32-year career in natural resources and managing public land. Now retired, she has been a Willamette Valley resident since 1973 and believes that site history is important.