

Not in our Wilson Town

Lynn Anderson THE BALTIMORE SUN

Bessie Rollings-Queen's tidy rancher sits on land where her forefathers, former slaves-turned-farmers, once planted long rows of tobacco and raised corn-fed chickens.

For Rollings-Queen, the wooded hamlet of Wilson Town near Odenton is more than her family's homestead. It's a historically significant African-American enclave that she says should be protected so that future generations might also know their rural heritage.

That's why she and other Wilson Town residents are fighting a Silver Spring developer's plan to turn a nearby gravel pit into an industrial landfill. They say the plan, which includes a main entrance at the end of a country lane and within several yards of an old church, is an example of environmental racism.

The battle against the landfill, which during the past decade has wended through various county offices and courtrooms, is being played out at the Maryland Department of the Environment. Anne Arundel County officials lost a court battle to block the landfill, and Wilson Town residents are urging state legislators to block the dump. The residents also met recently with members of a state panel investigating why landfills are more likely to be placed in minority communities.

"This is a quiet and peaceful place -- the place where many of us were born and raised," said Rollings-Queen, 57. "We don't want our harmony disturbed."

Developer Warren E. Halle, who wants to use about 180 acres of the 489-acre site he bought in the early 1980s for a landfill, did not return several phone calls to his Silver Spring office. He is completing a geohydrologic report to reactivate his permit application with the state.

Halle's lawyer, Lance Billingsley of Greenbelt, said that his client is eager to move ahead with the landfill project and is willing to work with Wilson Town residents to protect their homes and health.

"I doubt very much that he purposefully went to locate the landfill in an area because of the people who live there," said Billingsley, who added that Halle picked the site because of its rural location.

"It's one of the least obtrusive sites in Anne Arundel County," he said.

Rollings-Queen and other residents -- including homeowners from the mostly white communities of Woodwardville and those along Meyers Station Road -- disagree. They don't want the site near their community to become a final resting place for out-of-state asbestos and fly ash.

They met recently with the state Commission on Environmental Justice and Sustainable Communities, which was created by Gov. Parris N. Glendening in March last year to help poor communities combat environmental threats.

The commission is the first such state-level body in the nation. It's also looking at other cases in Maryland:

In Prince George's County, residents are fighting what they call a "concentrated effort" to establish a hub for private landfills. Residents report that the Washington suburb, which has the highest concentration of blacks in the state, has received at least four proposals for new or expanded landfills in the past three years.

In Baltimore, residents of Carroll and Shipley Hill, both predominantly black neighborhoods, are battling construction firm Potts & Callahan, which has legally dumped tons of construction waste into an old cement quarry near the Gwynns Falls since 1997. Potts & Callahan is looking to expand the landfill -- a permitting request that is tied up in court.

In Wilson Town, where Quakers once sheltered runaway slaves, concern over Halle's Chesapeake Terrace Rubble Landfill has produced a plethora of yard signs and even a Web site, www.stopodentonlandfill.com. Residents worry that if Halle gets his permits, their rural lifestyle could be soured for good.

Wilson Town residents depend on well water and argue that, should the landfill leak, their water supply could be permanently tainted. They wouldn't be the only ones at risk, opponents say. The proposed dump sits on a large underground aquifer that provides drinking water to the communities of Gambrills, Crofton and Millersville. Opponents also

say that trucks -- as many as 600 a day -- could send up dust clouds that would make breathing difficult, especially for those with asthma. And the value of their homes would surely plummet, they say.

Melvin Contee, the unofficial mayor of Wilson Town, said the community, tucked away among hardwood thickets off scenic country lanes, is surrounded by landfills -- seven in all. These include hazardous waste sites at the now-closed Fort Meade sanitary landfill and Joy-Boehm Rubble Landfill in Crownsville, two Superfund sites slated for clean-up.

"Why should we be dumped on further?" Contee said. "Why should we have more trash in our backyards? ... I can't imagine why anyone would allow this to happen to this community."

Owens' response

Anne Arundel County Executive Janet S. Owens has promised to block a proposal by the developer for an entrance across the street from the St. John AME Zion Church, which is included on the county's list of historic places. Although the structure was built in 1942, it replaced an 18th-century Quaker meeting house that was given to freed slaves who settled in the area after the Civil War.

Halle has county approval to build another entrance, but must first acquire right-of-way over private properties, including land owned by Constellation Energy, the parent company of Baltimore Gas and Electric Co. Halle fought county officials for more than a decade in court to win zoning approval.

State approval for the project, however, is pending.

"At this point, they [Halle Co.] still don't have a complete application," said Richard McIntire, an MDE spokesman. "When that occurs, it holds up the process even further."

Commission Chairman Scot T. Spencer, who has visited Wilson Town, said he "felt badly" that the landfill "was going to happen there."

"They have done nothing wrong other than live there," he said.

Problem elsewhere

Minority residents elsewhere also must endure the dumping of waste near their homes. In 1983, the U.S. General Accounting Office studied the location of landfills in eight Southern states and found that three of every four were in minority areas. In 1990, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency launched a study of the problem; three years later, the National Environmental Justice Advisory Council was established to protect minority groups from landfill exploitation.

Some states, including Maryland, followed the federal government's lead and set up their own watchdog groups. And yet, landfills and toxic dumps continue to emerge in minority communities throughout the nation.

"Even if you don't have a justification or a need for a landfill or a dump, the fact of the matter is that garbage is big business," said Robert D. Bullard, who is director of the Environmental Justice Resource Center at Clark Atlanta University in Atlanta.

Bullard called Wilson Town a "classic" case of environmental injustice in that it involves a community founded by former slaves -- a community that even today lacks basic necessities such as public water and sewer and proper roads.

"This landfill idea is just adding on to a historical legacy of neglect and denial," Bullard said.

Dollie Burwell, a North Carolina resident who in 1982 organized a highly publicized campaign against a proposed toxic waste dump in Warren County, where two-thirds of the population is African-American, said the continued location of landfills in minority areas troubles her.

"You would think that people would see the injustice in all of that," said Burwell, who lay in the road with 500 other protesters to block dump trucks filled with toxic waste. During her long fight against the dump, now being cleaned up, Burwell was arrested five times -- arrests she is proud to discuss.

"But we will continue to fight," she said.

At home in Wilson Town, Rollings-Queen says she is not giving up either.

She and four neighbors met recently with Sen. Robert R. Neall, a Democrat from Davidsonville. He promised to introduce legislation on the first day of the legislative session to scuttle the Halle landfill.

Rollings-Queen hopes the senator's move will work, but she still feels anxious.

"I'm really scared for my community," she said. "No one can make us any guarantees."

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