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Moving a Mountain

One Thing Stands in the Way of Va. Dump Owners' Plan to Sell to Developers: A Massive Pile of Junk

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For the past two decades, Northern Virginia builders have been dumping their lumber scraps, broken plasterboard and twisted metal -- the unwanted chaff of the building boom -- at Potomac Landfill in Dumfries, where a 190-foot mound of rotting construction debris rises above the treetops in plain view of Interstate 95.

Complaints about the landfill's dust, rodents and noxious odors have also piled up over the years, and everyone agrees: It's time to get rid of the junk.

Operators of the dump, which has long catered to developers, want to re-dump part of its contents elsewhere and -- this being Northern Virginia, where every spot of free space is an opportunity -- trade in a mountain of trash for a development treasure.

Potomac envisions a Restonlike town center filled with retail shopping, office space and hundreds of high-end homes and townhouses for down-at-the-heels Dumfries, 10 percent of which is covered by the landfill site.

"I've built several landfills," said Burwin Reed, the 67-year-old, no-nonsense Texan hired by Potomac to make it happen. "And now I'm going to take one down."

Reed and Potomac plan to embark this summer on an unusual experiment in waste management: the removal of 1.7 million tons of debris from the landfill and its wholesale transformation into a place where residents will want to shop and dine.

Nothing of the sort has ever been attempted in Virginia. Officials from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency said they do not know of another landfill removal scheme on the scale that Potomac is proposing anywhere in the United States.

"I have never heard of a C and D [construction and demolition] landfill being reclaimed for residential development," said Jeremy O'Brien, director of applied research at the Solid Waste Association of North America. "But it doesn't surprise me. The technology to process C and D debris has developed substantially over the last few years."

By any standard, the scale of the project is staggering. First, the company wants to build a materials reclamation facility (a "murf," in waste parlance) that would allow it to mechanically sort and process vast

amounts of debris. Then Potomac would mine the landfill's contents for salvageable material that can be run through the murf and sold. Whatever remains would have to be physically removed, one truckload at time, and dumped at a cheaper landfill downstate.

With the right amount of money, equipment and political support, Potomac says it can restore the land -- and Dumfries's fortunes.

"We know there are developers *and* investors that would be extremely interested in this property," said Dennis Leake, Potomac's president. "The problem is that you have to look at it technically and financially."

"Technically," added Leake, "it can be done."

Financially, he not so sure. "I'm willing to make the commitment," he said, adding that the environmental benefits of removing the dump are an incentive for both the company and the public. "We may need grants. But if we can't get government assistance, then shame on the government."

The process would take four to six years, Potomac estimates, provided the company receives the special-use permits it has applied for from the town. Dumfries is reviewing the company's application and will decide next month, but Potomac and town officials said they anticipate approval.

For now, the company continues to accept most construction and demolition waste on the site, employing about 80 workers, many of whom labor through the time-consuming process of screening out salvageable material by hand. Old concrete can be recycled and sold as aggregate for road construction. Lumber gets ground into mulch. A truckload of scrap metal sells for \$150 a ton. And the facility is no longer adding drywall, which releases sulfur dioxide when wet, so the rotten egg smell is gone.

But the company is still determining what's buried deep in the junk pile.

"You see that?" Reed asked one morning last week, stopping his pickup high on a ridge of the landfill. He pointed like a geologist at a crosscut where giant excavators had revealed the site's dumping history. The retired Army lieutenant colonel was encouraged.

"Look at all that dirt," he said.

There were old tires, too, along with shreds of dirty plastic and rotted plywood. But Reed estimated that one-third of the landfill is earth, and the material can be used to landscape the future town center. Another third can be salvaged and sold for profit, he figures.

Still, the removal of 500,000 tons of debris could cost between \$20 million and \$25 million, and possibly more, Reed acknowledged.

But Potomac's 100-acre site, at I-95 and Route 234, could be worth as much as \$40 million with the landfill removed, Dumfries Town Manager David Whitlow estimated.

Once the second-leading port in Colonial America, Dumfries is now a blur of highway motels, fast-food outlets, tattoo parlors and lube shops along Route 1 in Prince William County. Getting rid of the landfill would boost the town's self-esteem, not to mention its tax base, Whitlow said. Despite its size, the Potomac property generates just \$12,000 in annual revenue for the town.

What's worse, Whitlow said, Dumfries never permitted the landfill in the first place. The site is zoned residential, not industrial; when former owner Mack "Jack" Slye Crippen began accepting yard waste there in 1985, he never bothered to get permission. A 1987 court agreement has allowed the company to operate on the site.

"This landfill did not start with the blessing of the town," Whitlow said. "Getting it out of there will help a lot towards changing the image of the town."

Closing the landfill down and covering it up isn't a good option, he believes. "There will always be potential issues as long as you have stuff buried in the ground," he said. "If you remove all the material, you don't have to worry about leachate, gases and the potential for some other environmental threat."

Crippen, who hatched the plan for Potomac's overhaul before he died in February 2006, was fabled for launching several unusual large-scale projects in Northern Virginia, converting, for instance, his former "Stump Dump" in Great Falls to an elaborate animal farm. The blunt-spoken Crippen, a descendant of Confederate Army Maj. Gen. Joseph Wheeler, was also famous for accepting shredded documents from the CIA and the Soviets, who paid him in cash and crates of vodka.

Crippen's 65-acre unlicensed dump in Great Falls was also the source of numerous complaints with state and local regulators; its debris pile eventually grew to be the second-highest spot in Fairfax County. Authorities shut it down in 1988, and Crippen later stocked it with an assortment of exotic ungulates, including zebras, giraffes, llamas, camels and aoudads, a kind of African sheep.

His widow, Sandra L. Crippen, is the largest stakeholder in Potomac. "She's in charge," said Leake, her brother.

"She believes we need to be careful with our planet," he said.