

Opinion

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On Aug. 8, the League of Women Voters of Cortland County asked members of the county Legislature to make sure a key plan (the "final scope") for the Ash for Trash project deals with important public comments.

This plan scopes out how the county will assess the Ash for Trash project's possible effects on the environment. The result will be a report called a Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS).

The LWV has no position on whether the Ash for Trash project is good or bad for Cortland County. We looked at the process to make sure our elected officials are following New York state requirements for approving major projects and answering citizens' concerns. This should reduce risk of future lawsuits.

We are pleased that the county chose to get public input on the scope of the DEIS. Creating a detailed plan for the DEIS helps ensure the report will answer the public's questions and cover the topics important to a yes or no decision. Proper planning now should save time and avoid errors later.

A New York state law called SEQR (State Environmental Quality Review) spells out the steps the county must take. Cortland and Onondaga counties contracted with Barton & Loguidice to manage the SEQR process and prepare the DEIS.

Earlier this year, citizens pointed out that our Legislature did not follow several SEQR requirements. For example, the first DEIS plan created by Bar-

Ash for Trash: Good government benefits all parties

By Charlotte Farris,
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ton & Loguidice was just a list of topics. SEQR requires details in the plan for public comment. Thanks to pressure from citizens, the list was replaced with a real scoping plan, and the public comment process was restarted in May.

Barton & Loguidice wrote the detailed plan, reviewed public comments (277 pages) and revised the plan. At a July 8 meeting of the Legislature's Solid Waste Committee, the committee received and approved this final scope without a chance to read it. The county website shows that the committee also approved an amendment, "a more complete list of items that will not be included in the DEIS," without knowing what would be on that list.

The SEQR handbook states that the record will show which important issues will be covered in the DEIS, which were left out of the plan and why. Such a record is missing and needed. Explaining why some comments were dismissed can help people move on or better

define their concerns.

In the LWV's Aug. 8 letter to the Solid Waste Committee, we gave two examples of important public comments that were left out of the final scope.

(1) The consultants plan to use a recent "Community Health Assessment" to figure out possible impact of the Ash for Trash project on public health. Statistics on the community's health status do not shed light on whether an ash landfill would create a health hazard. The county's Public Health Department recommended a different approach that is not even mentioned in the final scope.

(2) The draft plan included a full analysis of fiscal impacts on Cortland County, but the final version has only a "broad economic evaluation." County residents need to understand what the project will cost or save taxpayers, compared with other options for managing the landfill. SEQR requires agencies to weigh economics in their decisions, and the county is hiring another outside firm

to develop financial models for use in the DEIS. The models will show future landfill costs under current practice, under the Ash for Trash proposal and under flow control (sending all the county's waste to the county landfill).

When the legislature approved the financial modeling contract, the resolution stated that the DEIS being prepared by Barton & Loguidice "includes financial projections." Why was that information removed from the plan for the DEIS, which will be reviewed by the public?

We understand that legislators manage a broad range of complex issues and hire outside experts for advice and services. At the same time, citizens expect our elected representatives to oversee consultants' work and respond to public concerns using the county's own departments as resources.

"When I was a legislator, in-house departments were consulted, and their expertise was valued," said Jane Richards.

The LWV asks the Legislature to work toward a more open government that respects and responds to its concerned constituents.

Editor's note: Guest columnists Charlotte Farris, Dorothea Fowler and Jane Richards are members of the League of Women Voters of Cortland County (lwvcortland@gmail.com). The LWV studies issues that matter to the people of Cortland County.