

# My sons go to school near state's largest landfill



## **Democrat and Chronicle**

Your Turn Michelle Grillone Guest columnist Michelle Grillone is a parent of three kids living in Waterloo.

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For 15 years now, I have wrestled with the choice of whether moving back to Waterloo was the right thing to do. My husband and I wanted our kids to grow up with our families close by and to have lots of room to run and play outside.

Unfortunately, after only a few months, we realized that the air was not fresh or clean but rather an obnoxious, overbearing rotting trash smell. This is also what my kids' schools smell like on any given day depending on which way the wind is blowing. It is extremely unsettling to know they are going into their schools to learn and, as they try to learn, are being exposed to toxic odors.

That's because Seneca Meadows – New York's largest landfill and likely our largest single point source of methane emissions – sits across the street from their schools. Students and teachers at Waterloo Middle School and High School are forced to endure the smell of our state's biggest dumping ground, with no recourse other than to stay home and miss class or work.

For years, students, teachers and parents have been reporting odors inside and around school buildings near the landfill. I have even had to pull my kids out of school on certain days due to the smell in the schools because it has made them nauseous, dizzy and lightheaded. Our schools cannot function properly if the environment is making students and teachers sick.

To be clear, this is not just a quality of life or preference issue. These odors pose a legitimate public health risk to kids and adults. In a recent survey conducted by local nonprofit Seneca Lake Guardian of more than 700 residents, respondents reported experiencing serious symptoms: headaches (42.5%); irritated eyes, nose, or throat (42.3%); dizziness (32%); breathing issues (30.3%); and more than one in four have reported being diagnosed with asthma, heart disease, or cancer since living near the landfill.

That's in a region that is already a lung cancer cluster, with rates 30-35% higher than national averages.

Each of these symptoms directly impact attendance, focus, and long-term health for our kids and their young lungs, which are especially vulnerable to harmful contaminants.

All of this raises the question: who is protecting our kids and how?

The school district tries their best. They have air filters, protocols for keeping air out on bad days, and report odors to the state as they occur – all of which are helpful, good faith efforts. But we must also address the problem at its source.

The only solution to truly protect our children, their teachers, and school staff is to shut down Seneca Meadows once and for all. And the only authority capable of doing so is Gov. Kathy Hochul and the Department of Environment Conservation, who are currently considering the landfill's new permit application.

Waste Connections, the landfill's Texas-based for-profit owner, is seeking to operate for 15 more years, expand its footprint by 47 acres, and grow seven stories taller. While Seneca Meadows was supposed to shut down on December 31, 2025, when it was expected to reach capacity, the landfill continues to operate thanks to a legal loophole in the State Administrative Procedure Act, which for years has allowed corporate polluters to operate under old permits while awaiting a final decision from the DEC.

Meanwhile, the town boards of Waterloo and Seneca Falls have refused to weigh in substantively as local protections remain mired in legal proceedings. It is their responsibility to ensure that the state makes the right decision.