

Garbage burn plant to close this year

Owner says Hudson Falls' adoption of clean air law played no part in shutdown



Clean air advocates and residents have protested against the plant for years, claiming its emissions made them sick.

Image 1 of 4

NEXT IMAGE >

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HUDSON FALLS — A controversial garbage burning plant towering over nearby Hudson Falls homes and the Hudson River will close by year's end.

WIN Waste Innovations, which owns and manages Wheelabrator Hudson Falls, announced earlier this week it will decommission the facility just

months after the village Board of Trustees voted unanimously to adopt a clean air law. The plant employs about 35 workers. Some employees will stay on through the decommissioning process; others are accepting severance packages, according to Mary Urban, spokeswoman for WIN Waste Innovations.

The decommissioning process is expected to take two years.

“These decisions are never easy, particularly for a facility with such a long history of serving its community,” CEO Daniel Mayo said in a post on Waste Advantage Magazine’s website. “Hudson Falls has played an important role in our company and in the region for decades. After carefully evaluating its role within our portfolio, we concluded that retirement represents the most responsible path forward. We are grateful to the employees whose dedication and professionalism have helped the facility serve customers and communities reliably for nearly 35 years.”

The announcement comes as a relief to residents who have spent years protesting the burn plant, first in an unsuccessful campaign against its 1991 construction across the street from their homes, and more recently, successfully lobbying for a local law that would require Wheelabrator to upgrade its emissions controls and monitor and publicly report emissions of 16 pollutants. The village’s Board of Trustees unanimously passed the ordinance, called the Clean Air Law, in April.

“The Village Board listened to us,” Rosemary Madonna, who lives across the street from the plant, said Thursday. “It’s been a long two-year mission. We were looking to improve the health and safety of (the plant). We never thought it would close. That was a pleasant surprise. I’m overwhelmingly relieved.”

Urban denied the new law played any part in the closure.

“The village has no role to play in air regulation, and the emissions ordinance is an unlawful overreach by local government,” Urban wrote in an email on Thursday. “We would have protected our rights to the fullest extent of the law, including pursuing litigation, had the facility’s long-term operational and financial outlook been more positive.”

For decades, residents complained Wheelabrator destroyed the value and enjoyment of their homes. They also claimed it produced loud noises, foul odors, fireballs and smoke that made them feel ill. While she does not have evidence of any correlation, Madonna said that “there is a sad amount of

cancer” in her neighborhood. Both her mother and her mother’s cousin, who fought the initial construction of the plant and then lived in its shadow, died of cancer.

After Madonna’s mother died and the plant had what it called “a rare smoke event,” she said she had “heaven-sent motivation.” Assuming she couldn’t force the closure of the plant, she set out to unite neighbors to improve the plant. With the help of Clean Air Action Network of Glens Falls, Madonna and neighbors formed Breathe Free Hudson Falls. They gathered petition signatures and attended every Village Board meeting from fall 2024 until the board adopted the law to force improvements at the plant.

“We would go to meetings, and we would get rolling of the eyes, but they knew we were serious and persistent,” Madonna said.

CAAN Chair Tracy Frisch said on Wednesday that the key was residents speaking out together.

“What happened in Hudson Falls shows that when residents organize and show up and speak out at local board meetings, they can get their concerns addressed,” Frisch said. “We give a lot of credit to the mayor and village trustees for listening to their constituents. The lesson is when people organize and speak out, they can move mountains.”

At the time of Wheelabrator’s announcement, it was in the process of renewing its Title V air permit from the state Department of Environmental Conservation and a solid waste management facility permit for the operation of a municipal waste combustor.

In an email on Wednesday, DEC said it was reviewing the air permit when the agency was informed the facility would close. The old permit that expired in 2024 was extended until Nov. 25, 2026.

A May 2019 report from the New School Tishman Environment and Design Center identified Wheelabrator Hudson Falls as the country’s top emitter of lead among all incinerators, based on data from 2014. It came in third in the country for mercury emissions. It also noted data showing that the plant burned 182,500 tons of garbage that year and emitted 289.83 pounds of lead, 26 pounds of mercury and more than 200,000 pounds of carbon dioxide.

DEC indicated the plant's emission levels of the poisonous heavy metals lead and mercury were down to 43.26 pounds and 5.85 pounds, respectively, in 2022.

Judith Enck, a former U.S. Environmental Protection Agency regional administrator and president of the environmental policy advocate group Beyond Plastics, said long-term health impacts for people exposed to this kind of pollution are unclear. However, she said anyone who lives downwind should have their soil tested if they grow fruits or vegetables.

"This is excellent news for everyone in the region who wants to breathe clean air and see our treasured Hudson River recover," Enck said in an email. "This incinerator should have been shut down long ago, and I commend the many local residents who have been working toward this goal for many years."

It is unclear where Washington County will now send its garbage. The chair of the Washington County Board of Supervisors, Robert Henke, did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Though the plant will technically be closed by the end of the year, WIN Waste Innovations noted in the announcement that it still needs approval from the New York Independent System Operator before decommissioning. They expect to hear from NYISO in October. From there, decommissioning will include planning and demolition.

"Planning and preparation involves emptying and cleaning tanks, assessing what can be recycled and reused, and readying systems for proper disposal," the company's announcement in Waste Advantage reads. "Light demo will include removal of outbuildings, recovery of all recyclable materials, and preparing main buildings for demolition. Heavy demolition will include removal of the main building, the stack, and the boiler."