

Landfill opponents rally to oppose expansion

By **Bob Banta** | Wednesday, February 11, 2009, 09:59 PM

About two dozen landowners and parents gathered near a northeast Travis County landfill Wednesday, urging state officials to deny a permit to expand the landfill and complaining that the waste repository is a hazard to nearby homes and residents.

The controversy began in 2006, when officials of BFI Waste Systems sought approval from the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality to enlarge the height of its 251-acre landfill on Giles Lane to 75 feet.

Fabian Martinez, 39, told protesters at the rally near Bluebonnet Hills Elementary School that he had withdrawn his three children from the school nearly two years ago because odors from the landfill made them sick.

"My kids rode the bus from school, and the smell was so bad my youngest child would throw up on the bus," Martinez said.

Astacia Cole, 32, said she also took her children out of Bluebonnet Elementary because of the odors. "BFI promised years ago that the odors would be gone, but they're not," she said. "You can't smell it now," Cole said, turning towards the grass-covered landfill behind the park where the rally was held, "but when you do, it's very strong."

Mark McAfee, who owns a business near the landfill, said tests near the repository showed signs of potentially hazardous substances and said the west side of the landfill has drainage problems, a complaint echoed by Jim Blackburn, a Houston attorney representing some of the opponents.

Blackburn said Wednesday in a phone interview that a monitoring well at the periphery of the landfill revealed the presence of chlorinated hydrocarbons. He said the drainage leaks are significant enough that "We may file a private lawsuit on the drainage issue on behalf of some private property owners," Blackburn said.

Representatives of BFI and citizens protesting the permit for the additional height testified earlier this month before an administrative law judge, who will present a recommendation to the TCEQ, possibly in June.