Aesthetic dump possible with new law

By Penny Wright
Special Writer

The immaculate, grass covered berms surrounding the site make a good impression. So does the winding tree-lined entrance.

"To the unsuspecting, the property appears to be a park. It's really a sanitary landfill — a dump for residential and commercial trash.

Usually, a landfill operation is called an "eyesore." Woodland Meadows doesn't fit that description.

"OUR COMPANY pays a lot of attention to aesthetics," said Ray Kellas during a tour of the Michigan Waste System owned landfill. "We want to be a good neighbor."

Located in the southeast corner of Canton Township off Hannan Road, Woodland Meadows, a 102-acre site, can be classified as a state-of-the-art landfill.

Gone are many annoyances typically associated with landfill operations: Acres of exposed garbage laying unattended, mud and dust choked access roads, and a debris covered perimeter.

At Woodland Meadows, solid waste is accommodated with professional efficiency. A constant cycle of dumping, compacting and covering minimizes the size of the actual disposal work area.

It also reduces nuisance conditions. The cycle is repeated year-round, seven days a week, 24 hours a day.

KELLAS, WHO manages Woodland Meadows, acknowledges that some nuisance factors like birds and odors cannot be totally eliminated. "A landfill will never smell like a rose garden, but frequent pickups and rapid covering with topsoil help a lot."

A landfill like Woodland Meadows would not have existed before 1978. In that year, the Michigan Solid Waste Management Act (PA 641) was passed. This act put "teeth" into an earlier piece of solid waste legislation known as Act 87.

The intent of both acts is to protect public health and the surrounding environment by carefully controlling the disposal of solid waste. Results are just now being felt.

"The solid waste disposal business has changed dramatically in the last 10 years," said Kellas. "In the past there were a lot of bad dumps. Act 641 provides for better facilities with new technology."

NOWADAYS, said Kellas, a landfill operation is big business. Lots of capital and effort are required to build, operate and maintain a disposal site.

"Fly-by-night operations wouldn't be in business now," Kellas said, adding that the parent company, Waste Management Inc., just reached $1 billion in sales last year.

Besides dealing with nuisance problems of landfills, current solid waste legislation tackles the more difficult task of protecting public health from the major landfill hazard — groundwater contamination.

Act 641 includes a host of regulations governing the handling of wastes, site specifications and monitoring for violations.

Woodland Meadows, which opened last year, has been built to the specifications of Act 641. A natural clay liner 100 feet thick separates the landfill menace "leachate" — the liquid produced when rainwater percolates through refuse and leaches material from the landfill — from groundwater streams.

An automatic collection system drains excess leachate buildup and discharges the flow into an existing sewage system. The discharge is monitored on a weekly basis.

While Kellas admits that the clay liner may leak as much as one-eighth to one-fourth inches of leachate per year, he contends that the landfill is environmentally safe.

GROUNDWATER experts differ over the issue of landfill safety.

State official Larry Holcomb, executive secretary of the Toxic Substance Control Committee, doubts that any landfill can be environmentally safe or "be a good neighbor."

"In a very unique site, a landfill can be environmentally safe," said Holcomb. "In Michigan, landfills generally will leak. And everyone we've looked at, the leachate has hazardous waste in the flow."

Groundwater consultant George Kunkle of Novyr, Tisco, Hindo Limited of Farmington Hills has a different view. Kunkle believes each landfill site has its own risks, but changes in landfill management can make the environment safe for the short term.

Ray Kellas, menager of Woodland Meadows, describes landfill operations at the 102-acre site in Canton Township.
DAN DEAN/staff photographer

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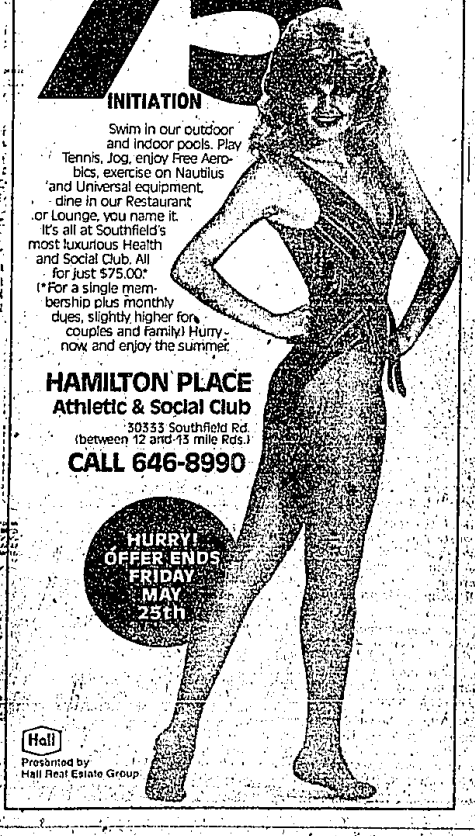

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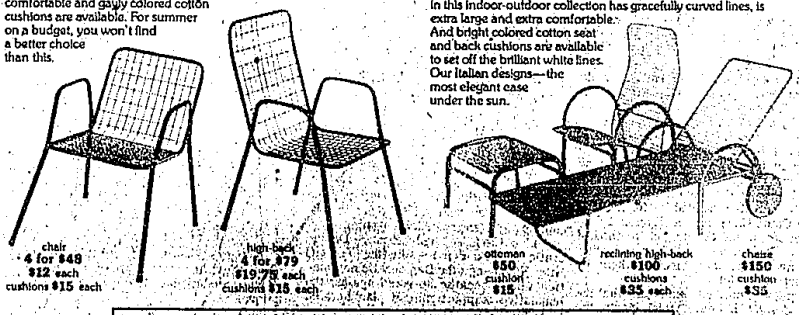

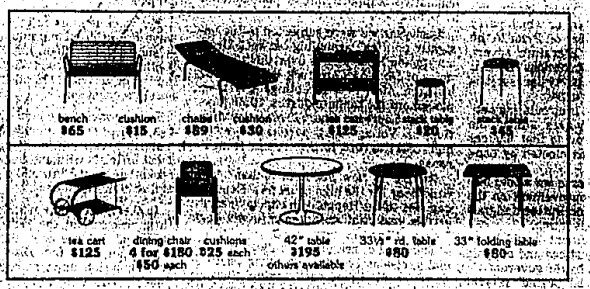

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