Introduction: Gordon Gebauer, Westford Planning Commission & Outreach Committee

Challenges in the Village Center:

- Doing nothing is not an option!
- System for the Town Office and library is at the end of its useful life (@50 years old) and is under the parking lot, compromising leach field function
- Difficult soil conditions are found throughout the Village Center
- The Common Hall has no system, only a holding tank; pumping is required for events of 50 people or more, like tonight's.
- Part of the Planning Commission's job is to look ahead and provide strategies for maintaining a vibrant community. These ideas and concepts require forward, future-oriented thinking. These also require extensive research to understand their viability and cost impacts. The role of the Planning Commission is to present these ideas to the Town and hear residents' feedback. The voters of the Town will have the ultimate say on projects that require a bond vote.
- The Town has evaluated a solution that would serve only the Red Brick Meetinghouse, Common Hall, and Town buildings with a mound system. This would cost $325,000, has to be paid for on a five-year note, and is not eligible for State financing.
- The community wastewater solution, for which we now have a Preliminary Engineering Report and cost estimates, provides a longer-term solution that supports more of the Town's goals, meets the immediate needs, and offers benefits for taxpayers and property owners. We are presenting that tonight and will ask for your questions and feedback both now and early this fall.

Planning Commission's Intentions:

- It is the Planning Commission's intent that connection be voluntary. However, this decision ultimately will be made by the Select Board, through adoption of a wastewater ordinance.
- The cost impact is recognized; but wastewater is the key limitation on many of the desired conditions in the Village Center, and has advantages for individual users and the Town.
- A publicly-sponsored, community wastewater project would, in addition to supporting uses and goals identified by the citizens and in the Town Plan, remove limitations on bedrooms for connected properties; only a permit from the Town would be required, as opposed to a state "WW" permit

Community Wastewater System Overview:

- A system serving the Village Center would feature STEP (Septic Tank / Effluent Pump) systems at each property
- Effluent pumps would bring wastewater (without solids) to a central pumping station
- Small diameter low pressure sewers would be used, which allow shallower trenching than conventional gravity sewers
- The leach field would be a dual field with alternating use, to extend its life

Costs

- System's estimated cost is about $2.4 million for the Total Project Cost (including engineering, permitting, legal, environmental, and construction)
- Monthly costs for a single family house or equivalent are estimated at $60 to $95 – so it would be an additional utility bill
- A portion would go on the town-wide tax rate; a portion would be paid by system users.
- The Town and consultant team are exploring and applying for any and all funding opportunities to reduce the town and user cost
- COVID recovery ("ARPA") funds can be used for wastewater infrastructure, and other State funds have been set aside for communities like Westford
- The Community system would be financed over 30 years, where installing a system at the Common Hall to meet Town needs only would be financed over 5 years – a larger and immediate impact
- A longer payback ensures that future residents who enjoy the benefit of these investments also help pay for the investment.

System Operations:

- As an incentive for properties in the service area to connect, the Planning Commission intends that there be no out-of-pocket cost for those who connect when the system is constructed.
- Periodic maintenance would be performed by a contractor hired by the town; these costs would be incorporated into the monthly charge to system users

Community Approval:

- This is the first outreach step to those owners who would be eligible to connect
- A bond vote is anticipated for March 2022 Town Meeting, with an indebtedness amount estimated at $750,000 to $1 million.

Questions and Answers

Q1. Please review the incentives that will be offered for potential users to connect to the system.

A1. The Town is including the cost to install the STEP systems into the Total Project cost, so that individuals who connect will not face out-of-pocket costs at the time of connection. It is not known whether the Select Board would pay for the cost of connections that are requested after the system is built and operating.

Q2. Does that include the cost of re-plumbing houses that are connected, and de-commissioning their existing septic tanks?

A2. Yes; these costs are in the cost estimates in the Project Engineering Report. All estimates will be refined during final design.

Q3. Where will the new septic tanks and effluent pumps be located? Most houses have their current plumbing and septic in their back yards.

A3. In STEP systems, the effluent pump is integrated within the septic tank; it's not a separate feature. Connections and STEP tank locations are worked out in final design.

Note In some cases where changing indoor plumbing is difficult and space allows, STEP tanks can be located in back or side yards where existing plumbing exits a building, and then connected to the force main in the street. This is assessed during the Final Design phase.

Q4. Will the Town's bond be used in part to finance individual property connections? It seems difficult to convince property owners outside the Village Center to pay for that.

A4. The Town's general taxpayers ultimately would pay the Town's share of the system's capital cost and operating cost. That share is based on the number of gallons per day that are needed to support Town functions or that are reserved for future development, which would pay connection fees. So general taxpayers would not pay for the private owners' share per se, though grants would reduce everyone's cost for the system, private and public.

Q5. I'm concerned about construction; will Route 128 have to be dug up? What about excavation during or left open during the winter, which makes a mess?

A5. For any crossings of Route 128, directional drilling would be used to minimize disruption. This is a technique that has been used for other large and small community projects in north and central Vermont successfully to minimize highway disruption.

A5. The Town will not be forced to bid at any specific date, or to use winter season construction. A positive Town bond vote will obligate the State's share of the funding, but it does not obligate the Town to begin construction immediately. Bidding and construction can be done on the best schedule for the Town considering costs, weather, and needs.

Q6. Since there will be electric-powered pumps in tanks at each property and a central pump station, will backup power and storage be provided for emergencies?

A6. Yes. The plans include storage redundancies and back-up power.

Q7. Who will pay for pumping of the STEP tanks?

A7. The monthly user fees (paid by the Town for its share of the system, and property owners for their shares) will include inspection and periodic pumping of the STEP tanks.

Q8. The projected monthly costs would support pumping an existing system three times per year; what's the economic value in connecting?

A8. While the project team will make every effort to keep costs as low as possible through grants and design, it is valid to compare the system connection and ongoing cost against the potential cost of replacing or reconstructing an existing system. For houses that

require a new mound system, the typical cost has been near $30,000. The project team encourages property owners to speak with those they trust regarding their home's or property's situation and value to be able to make the right decision on connecting.

Q9. How much additional development in the Village Center would this system support?

A9. The current plan, which assumes the dispersal field can provide 12,600 gallons per day of capacity, would provide enough additional capacity for the equivalent of 10 single family houses – IF everyone who is eligible to connect does connect. It is possible that the dispersal field can support more capacity, but how much more will not be known until hydrogeology is tested this summer.

A9. Seth Jensen from the Planning Commission noted that building a system that only takes care of the Town's buildings and common halls is NOT a "no-development" alternative. Today, a Dollar General retail store could use the grandfathered capacity on the site of a single family house to build a store - this happened in a neighboring community in Franklin County – but because of regulatory constraints on its wastewater system, the Westford Store cannot have full seating. Promoting revitalization, and the construction of quality uses that meet the Form Based Code design standards, requires wastewater capacity – which requires action and investment. The greatest tragedy would be the loss of historic buildings if the wastewater capacity that supports adaptive re-use can't be provided – a situation that just happened in Hyde Park.

Q10. Are there provisions for metering flows, rather than assuming a house is actually using its full permitted "design flow" of wastewater? Most households use less than 420 gallons per day!

A10. A community wastewater system can be metered and the specific flows are reported to the Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC). Where it's demonstrated that flows are lower over time, Vermont DEC affirms the available additional capacity. The Town can then allocate that capacity to users through its wastewater ordinance.

Q11. When will plans for re-plumbing, siting STEP tanks, and other construction be completed?

A11. During the Final Design engineering process, property owners will receive a notice from the project team, the Town's Select Board, and attorney asking whether the owner intends to connect to the system. Once it's clear who intends to connect, the engineering team will request permission to enter the property so that detailed plans can be completed.

Q12. How will the fees be established?

A12. The amount and frequency of fees for system users is established in a Wastewater Ordinance that the Select Board will review and adopt through a warned public hearing process. The project team expects that the Select Board will review a draft ordinance in roughly November 2021.

Q13. Will surveys of properties be completed? And will property owners be notified when this is happening?

A13. Additional survey work will be needed during Final Design. All property owners will be contacted in advance to give permission for project team members to enter their properties. Other than at the Maple Shade Town Forest wastewater disposal site, no property survey work has been completed yet.

Q14. If final design is still going on over the winter, how can the Town be asked to vote on a final project in March 2022 when the cost won't be fully known yet?

A14. An important question! Bond votes generally include contingency language: Voters are likely to be asked to authorize a bond of up to a specified dollar amount, for a project of up to a maximum specified total cost, and only IF a minimum amount of grant funding is secured to ensure the cost to the taxpayers and system users stays within a certain range. Once the final design is completed, the Select Board would only have the authority to authorize the construction contract if the total cost and grant funding are within the limits authorized by the voters.

Q15. How does the bond vote work? When does the public participate?

A15. There are two steps. First, on or before January 21, 2022, the Select Board must hold a warned public hearing and vote to put the question to the voters. As noted under Answer 14, it is likely the question will include cost and grant funding contingencies. The second step takes place at Town Meeting when all eligible voters have the opportunity to vote yes or no on the question.

Q16. What will the leach field on the Town Forest site look like?

A16. The field will look like a grassy field – much like it looks now. There will be a limited amount of pumping equipment at the surface which is usually concealed with landscaping. The vast majority of this equipment will be located on the east side of Brookside Road. A visit to Brooks Field in Warren, and the Winter Park system in Waitsfield, are two examples of what you may see if a system is implemented in Westford.

Q17. It doesn't feel like there has been much outreach outside of the Village Center. What is planned to increase general knowledge in the Town?

A17. While there has been information provided through the Town's website, newsletter, handouts at the Town Office, and planning commission meetings, more events similar to this dinner and a new project website with FAQs (https://www.westfordsfuture.com) are two of the ways that outreach is being ramped up. Additional work by the outreach committee is underway.

Q18. How can more specific information be provided to help service area residents make good decisions?

A18. Starting with this meeting, property owners within the service area will be contacted regularly this fall – and are encouraged to contact the team with any questions or comments. Property owners will be asked for their opinion and needs around a potential system connection. It is not realistic for the Town to move ahead to a bond vote for a community system unless a share of the prospective private users plan to connect.

Q19. With total property taxes rising, why would the broader public support this initiative?

A19. It's becoming better understood that financial investments in public facilities have to be made to have the types of amenities and quality of life that is desired in Westford. Enabling greater use of, for example, the Store and the Common Hall benefits the public and can lead to a stronger tax base overall. It is also important to note that the Jackson Farm and Forest site (now Maple Shade Town Forest) received broad support from voters across the Town, and that the Town's actual municipal tax rate decreased in 2021.

Q20. Comment: We appreciate all of the work done by the volunteers towards creating a desirable future for Westford, and hope that the funding can work.

A20. Thank you!

Q21. Comment: It's clear that the civic buildings need a solution, and that developing the Pigeon property would help build the tax base. Would the solution that serves the civic buildings only really cost the taxpayers more?

A21. The impact on taxpayers for the next five years would be substantially more, without creating the added flexibility and support for economic vitality that a community system would offer. The civic-buildings-only solution would not be eligible for Vermont Clean Water State Revolving Fund (CWSRF) grants or loans, which must provide capacity for more than just civic buildings. The financing and payback window for the civic-buildings-only system would be limited to 5 years instead of 30.