

Westford Town Common Wastewater Project  
Outreach Advisory Committee Meeting Wednesday, February 22, 2023  
Approved: March 22, 2023  
Attending:

Town Office: Mellissa Manka, Town Planner

Zoom:

Gordon Gebauer, Seth Jensen, Planning Commission  
Eric Ford, Pat Haller, Wendy Doane, Committee Members  
Maureen Wilcox, Lori Johnson, Barb Peck, Residents  
Amy Macrellis, JB Hinds, consultants to the Town

1. Roll Call

Gordon Gebauer served as chair and called the meeting to order at 10:02 AM.

2. Minutes of January 2023

The thorough notes were appreciated. Gordon moved and Pat seconded approval of the January minutes. Motion approved.

3. Updates

Melissa started with project updates. Tom Brown has received all of the signed ESA/PSAs and Step II documents, as well as the CWSRF Priority List application (which is submitted annually). Pat asked if the consultants are under contract; the ESA and PSA have been signed. Consultants will not invoice until there is an Authorization Letter from the State. However, both are contracted and able to bill starting from the date of Select Board signing.

Responses to State comments on the State ARPA grant were submitted last week. The CWSRF Priority List application process yielded more “points” than previously, which may increase the share of State pollution control grant funding that ultimately comes to the Town. Melissa has just completed the application for a Community Revitalization and Recovery Grant (CRRG) funding for \$500,000.

Stone Environmental is setting up a master project schedule in Microsoft Project with engineering milestones. Birchline Planning also set up and ‘re-set’ the dates in the [google calendar](#) for the team that shows both November and March 2024 vote dates. Seth asked when a more detailed public-facing timeline can be set up. Amy (Stone) showed the master project schedule with Preliminary Design, Pre-Discharge In-Stream Water Quality Evaluation, multiple different surveys including wildlife, Detailed Design Plan, etc. The 30% meeting would be in roughly August. A Resolution of Necessity would have to be adopted in September by the Select Board for a November bond vote.

If a November vote is successful, final design would take place in 2024. With the substantial time required for permit review at VT DEC and VTrans [right of way process](#), bidding would be over the winter of 2024 with construction in 2025. As Amy noted, these schedules can become less

## Westford Town Common Wastewater Project

Outreach Advisory Committee Meeting Wednesday, February 22, 2023

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complicated in terms of small sub-steps once the detailed work on surveys is completed this coming year. Seth recommended and Amy agreed that the VTrans design section needs to see the project well in advance of summer 2024. Amy also noted that some tasks can be moved around to meet public concerns or community needs.

Pat noted that many residents will want to know how many people in the service area are committed to connecting. Amy said that the remaining field survey data collection will happen this spring; the public and property owners will be notified and contacted, enabling the consultant team to reconnect with property owners. This work in spring/summer should provide a good sense of who is interested in connecting before the Select Board needs to consider the bond vote question in (roughly) July and August. Pat offered to help with property owner contacts for those who may not have responded by email.

Eric asked about the grants that are being pursued, specifically, how Melissa is characterizing project costs in the applications for funding when final numbers are not known. Melissa is using the estimates from GME in 2021 plus a 25% contingency as recommended by VT DEC. CRRG has to tie in to economic development or housing, so Melissa has focused on the cost to connect the Town Offices, Brick Meetinghouse, Westford Common Hall, and Store, and \$500,000 for the force main. JB noted that the estimates are typical for this phase of a project; funders expect some uncertainty with construction projects. Melissa's approach has been to get as much grant funding lined up as possible, since any funding that is not needed or has unworkable terms can be declined.

Amy noted the goal is to minimize the cost to the taxpayers. Pat asked if the O&M numbers would be part of the bond authorization; JB said no, that is a Select Board authority. The Select Board will have to make many decisions that would go into the wastewater ordinance before the bond vote because this will inform how the costs are to be allocated, and thus the ultimate amount in the bond vote. Importantly, a bond vote **MUST** be held even if the construction cost of the project is 100% grant funded. Importantly, many decisions about how O&M costs will be allocated will be made in the ordinance.

JB made the point that this committee is a discussion forum where components of the project are discussed and understood. It is **NOT** the forum where these decisions will be made nor is it authoritative.

### 4. Communications Plan

The committee discussed the next phase of activity which will be in early April, when survey crews will be in the service area. Property owners within the service area will need to be contacted formally for site permission. Suggestions:

1. A **letter to everyone in the service area**, noting that the Town will be contacting them for access (either contacting for the first time, or again) and that survey crews will be out; where to get more information.

## Westford Town Common Wastewater Project

Outreach Advisory Committee Meeting Wednesday, February 22, 2023

Approved: March 22, 2023

2. Approximately 2 days before survey crews are out, an announcement on the **website and FPF that crews will be out in the field** and what they are doing. Why? To support design engineering that will establish the specific layout and refine the detailed costs and benefits of a community wastewater system, which will ultimately be voted on by the Town.
3. **April newsletter**, also posted on the blog, will walk the community through what the survey crews were doing, upcoming activity, and where to get information.

Pat will take the first draft of the letter to everyone in the service area and circulate it.

Eric stated that we need to do a communications plan, probably in person. April would be an ideal time for an in-person work schedule to determine what is coming through to the Planning Commission, what will be asked of the Select Board and when, and what points are ideal for interactive information with the community. Prep work will be needed. The group set the workshop meeting for April 18<sup>th</sup> at 8:30 AM at the Town Office.

Seth noted that introducing the team to the community in the next newsletter would be a way to ease back into communications on the project. JB and Amy will send biographies today to Pat, who will create a draft for the newsletter that will be sent to Gordon for Planning Commission review tomorrow (Thursday). The newsletter deadline is Monday the 27<sup>th</sup> at noon.

JB discussed academic planning literature on social media and best practices for planning and information. She noted that equitable engagement requires synchronous information exchange; Front Porch Forum and Facebook posting are asynchronous. Material facts can change between the time of a post and a response. Public bodies are encouraged to use social media to direct people to both the static information (i.e., the FAQs) and to upcoming opportunities for synchronous information exchange (i.e., public meetings and forums). To be credible and have value to the person posing a question, information and responses need to be vetted. Re-engagement with synchronous meetings is essential.

Eric noted that it's useful to hear conversations on FPF, which helps build out the FAQs and content. Being present to observe is useful. Putting information out is not interactive, but posts can be proactive. It is not, however, a forum for information exchange. He asked whether the Wastewater Wednesdays were helpful at this point and if there is a risk of burnout. Wendy noted that focusing on the service area outreach and newsletter is probably best. A final 'Wastewater Wednesday' could say (1) engineering and survey work to answer questions is starting; (2) residents in the service area will be contacted; (3) the team will be working on a communications plan to get the answers and engineering out to the community, so that there are effective, appropriate opportunities to ask questions in a forum where information can be exchanged; (4) in the meantime, please refer to the FAQs and please contact the Town for accurate information on what is happening, when, and how questions will be addressed.

Westford Town Common Wastewater Project  
Outreach Advisory Committee Meeting Wednesday, February 22, 2023  
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Melissa can continue to compile questions. Eric will polish up the points in the paragraph above for posting. Gordon agreed it's appropriate to take a pause. Wastewater Wednesdays has certainly reinvigorated the discussion. JB also noted that there may need to be a place to direct questions; the Planning Commission would be the best place to ask questions. Emailing or writing Melissa to add discussion to the Communications Section of the Planning Commission questions will be the focus for responding to feedback and questions. Seth noted that all meetings have to be accessible physically and online; hybrid meetings are essential. Individuals on the committee should not be posting personally or individually. JB did suggest some form of facebook live-type approach.

A note for FPF that states "Westfordsfuture.com has answers to commonly asked questions. The Planning Commission has time for open discussion on the wastewater project at each of its meetings, which are scheduled here (link)." Wendy noted that a consistent response and a time and place for discussion will be needed. Melissa will consider and draft an approach to this.

#### 5. Next meeting

The March meeting at which the newsletter content and outreach to property owners in the service area will be discussed will be Wednesday, March 22<sup>nd</sup> at 10:00 AM.

#### 6. Citizens to Be Heard

Barb Peck said that her posts did not contain inaccuracies or opinions. She recommended stopping Wastewater Wednesdays because it prompts her to respond each time. She stated that the Planning Commission has a very strict agenda for communication, and should consider a way to open up discussion. She stated that fact and emotional posts should be separated and avoided. She noted that many people are not comfortable speaking in public. Seth noted that the PC's rules of procedures such as asking for recognition by the chair and refraining from ad hominem comments.

The meeting was adjourned at 11:45 AM.

Respectfully Submitted,



Juli Beth Hinds