

Westford Town Common Wastewater Project
Outreach Advisory Committee Meeting Wednesday, May 3, 2023
Approved: June 7, 2023

Attending:

Town Office: Melissa Manka, Town Planner

Zoom: Gordon Gebauer, Seth Jensen, Planning Commission; Eric Ford, Pat Haller, Committee Members; Wendy Doane, Maureen Wilcox, Laurie Johnson, Ira Allen (phone), Residents; Amy Macrellis, JB Hinds, consultants to the Town

1. Roll Call & Amendments to the Agenda

Gordon Gebauer called the meeting to order at 10:04 AM. The item at 11:20 on stakeholder information distribution was moved to after the discussion on the outreach plan.

2. Minutes of March 2023

Gordon noted an omission in the description of the new FAQs and suggested a change that has been made in the draft meeting google document. Pat moved and Eric seconded approval of the March minutes as amended. Motion approved.

3. Project Updates

Contracting: Melissa updated the committee on her work with the Vermont Bond Bank, which has new staff who are requiring quite a bit of additional information and work to authorize expenditures. The subsidy was granted by VT DEC, but it has to go through the Bond Bank. The urgent need is approval of funding to allow the geo-probes to move forward and to pay the consultants. Melissa said that Ken Linge at the Bond Bank and Tom Brown at VT DEC are acutely aware of the bottleneck and the critical nature of the funding. The State ARPA funding is also ready for signature. Melissa's work in staying on top of the funders was noted with great appreciation by the committee and consultants.

Technical: Amy provided an update on technical work. Stone is starting preliminary design work. Following Melissa's communication with all of the property owners in April, Stone sent its letters to property owners requesting permission to enter the sites. This was sent last week. Responses are coming in. Pat asked if there is anything the committee can do to help with property owners who haven't responded. Amy suggested that once responses to Stone drop off in frequency, Stone can identify which property owners haven't responded and will let the Committee know where additional follow-up is needed.

Amy also submitted the VTrans 1111 permit application for ledge probes in the right of way and received approval. Stone is now preparing for the ledge probe contractor to be on site the in June, either June 21-22 or June 22-23. Platform Environmental LLC is the firm who will bring a track-mounted, rubber-tire geo probe to the site.

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Eric wants to get some video of the geo probe if possible, one because “the machine is so cool,” and second to demonstrate work being done. There is definitely an opportunity to get video; Eric will work to get some video while the machine is working.

Gordon asked about the archaeological survey. Amy said this is a little premature; the topo and utility survey is needed first, along with the disturbance on individual properties from new sewer laterals (especially along Brookside Road), so that the scope of archaeology can be focused and more limited. A Phase 1B will be needed at the north end of Maple Shade in the drip zone, but this doesn't make sense until the drip fields are laid out better. The possible contractors are Hartgen (which did the Phase 1A), UVM, and Charlie Cross. JB asked if it was worth telling the contractors that the Town will be needing a scope this summer; Amy agreed it is worth letting them know when we'll need a scope.

There are stakes in the ground that are noting locations of the survey benchmarks that GME completed. Amy reported that Stone was able to find most of the benchmarks, which is very helpful.

Funding: Gordon announced that he, Melissa, and JB participated in the Vermont Economic Progress Council Board hearing last week. The Town's project was well received and two Board members spoke out in favor of the project. The Board voted unanimously to advance Westford's request to the inter-agency review panel. Melissa said she was advised that there's “a bit of back and forth” to determine whether there are issues or conflicts between the Department of Economic Development and other agencies. The application then goes to the Governor's office. Awards are expected “sometime in June.” To date, none of the recommendations from VEPC have been rejected. Melissa was warmly thanked for her excellent work on the application. Pate noted that Melissa has done six separate funding application processes to line up the funding stack for this project.

4. Working Project Schedule/Draft Communications Plan

Gordon thanked the two members, staff, and consultants who worked on the draft communications plan. Eric provided an overview of the proposed communications plan which is now color-coded. In-person and direct communication are balanced with electronic communication. Eric reviewed with the ‘budget and deliverables’ tab. Once the Planning Commission approves this budget and approach, the team will start with the first deliverables which are a poster with project basis (and driving to website), and a handout/takeaway version of the poster that's easier to update and print in house as needed.

A couple of different mailers are proposed. One is a base-level with public meeting and bond vote dates that can be distributed electronically, via mail, or as a handout. A ‘booklet’ style version is next, which cannot be prepared until the first engineering cost estimate and design are more locked in. This is intended to be more of an ‘everything about the project’ deliverable. A video is being discussed; this is the most complex in terms of cost and production. It would be

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an overview of why, what, the plan, some people talking about what specifically is happening and why, and need. The video would be able to be shared in a variety of formats. Eric noted some people are more apt to take in information through a video format. This would be the most time consuming and expensive but is important for a video-uptake audience.

Before the bond vote, a mailer would go out with the 'just the facts' before the bond vote with language and information similar to what is produced for the school budget vote: how much, when to vote, what the specific language is. Eric noted that a gathering similar to the BBQ held at the Westford Common Hall also is budgeted.

Gordon asked what the source of the funds would be. Melissa stated that outreach expenses were approved by Vermont DEC and can come from the \$125,000 grant. Gordon asked about hiring designers for the poster. Eric said that hiring a designer for the printed materials would be desirable and not a significant investment, but would put another set of eyes on the communication materials and improve the quality of the communication. Once the plan is approved by the PC, Eric can work with the Town's procurement process and find a designer who can help with initial design in June, and the more detailed work in August/September. A video person who can shoot and edit would be the other person to procure if a video is to be made. Pat noted that Marcus Pante (sp?) could do a drone shot after the dispersal field is mowed so the outline is clear and visible.

Eric reviewed the calendar tab. More context will be added in after approval as the team gets into the process of developing specific events and deliverables. August 15th is noted as a target date to have as much engineering and cost information complete as possible so that key information can be finalized and turned into informational materials. Amy noted that since utility and topo surveys and ledge probes are happening, by the middle of August we can have a reasonable expectation that we'll know whether numbers can be put forward, or if more time is needed. Eric noted that the schedule process has helped identify the time needed relative to any bond vote date for information preparation and distribution.

Eric reviewed events and steps that the committee would engage in using this draft schedule. Fourth of July would be a 'soft touch' promoting the website, alerting community members to the availability of information and upcoming events. Pat noted that it's important to alert the public that there will be meetings and more detailed information, as well as explaining what information (especially cost) will be forthcoming and when. The committee noted that goals for the 4th of July communication need to be fleshed out in the next month or so. One statement is "by the end of August, you'll be receiving communication on project meetings and information."

Wendy emphasized that any presence must be a very light touch. She stated that 4th of July organizers were not especially keen on active outreach, i.e. "let the 4th of July be the 4th of July," but that citizens are not necessarily reading the FAQs.

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A service area gathering/BBQ is on the draft schedule for the end of July. The intent is to allow service area residents and businesses to ask detailed questions and understand where progress is on the project. The Store or Westford Common Hall would be options for a location.

In the draft schedule, September represents the “launch date” A formal Select Board presentation of the project plan is scheduled tentatively for August 24th. A first formal communication presentation would then be the week after Labor Day, backed up by electronic information and the printed booklet. JB went through the intent of the Select Board meetings; updates would be provided monthly. She described the purpose of the Resolution of Necessity, public information meeting, and formal public hearing (which is more perfunctory to meet statutory requirements).

Melissa has talked with the Select Board about a possible special meeting to review the project schedule, communication plan, funding implications, and ordinance process. Melissa suggested scrapping the May 11th meeting and work on scheduling a special meeting. The State ARPA and CWSRF signatures also could be addressed at that time. Members and consultants agreed this was an excellent idea. Pat noted that the outreach plan needs to go to the Planning Commission, which meets May 15th; a meeting soon after the PC meeting would be ideal to cover project schedule, outreach, funding, and ordinance work. Amy and JB noted that many aspects of the ordinance will not be able to be finalized until the system’s design is far more advanced, but that the Select Board can go on record with certain policy intentions that it intends to include in an ordinance, if, when, and as the system is built. Pat noted that the schedule as developed would use existing, standing meetings to avoid overwhelming the Board. The SB also needs to recognize the need for Town Attorney engagement in the ordinance and bond vote process. Melissa and Nanette will work on a special meeting.

Eric resumed the schedule review. In September, after the first major public meeting, information would need to be widely available. A walk-through of the system would be offered so people can see where system components would be. Heading into October, a senior lunch, second public information meeting, and mailings would be sent. One aspect that the committee needs to nail down is when ballots will be mailed to Westford voters; since many people now vote by mail, the actual voting date is less critical. The schedule has been set up to recognize that people need information to make voting decisions well in advance of the actual voting date. Halloween was noted as a no-go zone for any non-Halloween-related activities.

Summarizing, August 15th is noted as the key date for understanding system layout and costs. Any of this can shift based on multiple factors. In-person opportunities are emphasized; printed materials are kept to a limited number.

The next step is for the Planning Commission to review the plan on May 15th. Eric will be attending and can make the presentation.

5. Project Website/FAQs

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Gordon has drafted new FAQs. Several people have made changes and modifications that he has accepted. Seth needs to add some language to one of the questions. Gordon will put together a consolidated version accepting changes, and present these to the Planning Commission for review and approval at the May 15th meeting.

Mr. Fleury had asked a question about the division of financial responsibility between taxpayers and service area connections. JB suggested that at the Select Board special meeting, this question be elevated as a specific issue that will need discussion as the costs become better understood.

6. Stakeholder Distribution Plan

Certain specific stakeholders will need information on physical elements of the plan. The Highway Department, School, Library, and Select Board should receive a monthly update on logistics and work. JB asked if this can be a future action item. Gordon noted that perhaps this can be folded into the regular Select Board update. This will be worked on at an upcoming Planning Commission meeting.

7. Visuals

These had been sufficiently discussed under the proposed communications plan item. No further discussion or action was held.

8. Selectboard Memo #4

The committee determined that since the Select Board has had a meeting previously on the ordinance at which sample language was reviewed, a specific date for this can be tabled until after the Select Board special meeting.

9. June Newsletter/Additional Outreach

The committee discussed whether additional communications committee meetings are needed at this point. It is likely to be necessary to meet more often as the team moves into more intensive outreach. Setting a date for the special Select Board meeting will be important. A newsletter topic for June should announce that survey crews are in town and ledge probes are scheduled. Amy has already written an announcement that can be put in the June newsletter. Wednesdays every other week generally will be planned on from June 7th moving forward. Amy will attend roughly every other meeting.

Gordon's puppy Zevon joined the meeting at 12:42 PM.

10. Citizens to Be Heard

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Participating citizens did not have any comments or questions.

The meeting was adjourned at 12:45 PM.

Respectfully Submitted,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Juli Beth Hinds". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish at the end.

Juli Beth Hinds