

TOWN OF WESTFORD
PLANNING COMMISSION/OUTREACH COMMITTEE SPECIAL MEETING MINUTES
COMMUNITY WASTEWATER INFORMATIONAL MEETING
MINUTES FOR SEPTEMBER 13th, 2023 MEETING
Approved on October 2, 2023

Planning Commissioners Present: George Lamphere, Gordon Gebauer, Seth Jensen, Mo Reilly, Mark Letorney

Outreach Committee Members Present: Eric Ford

Consultants Present: Amy Macrellis (Stone Environmental), Peter Lazorchak (Stone Environmental), JB Hinds (Birchline)

Town Staff Present: Melissa Manka (Town Planner), Harmony Cism (Planning Assistant, Minute Clerk), Greg Barrows (Town Treasurer)

Meeting Began: 6:36pm

Introduction:

Gordon Gebauer gave the introduction. The same meeting will happen again in October. There was a similar meeting 2 years ago. We will not be making any decisions. The purpose of this meeting is to talk about the project and answer questions.

The Town has secured grant funding to pay the entire capital cost of a modern system, which will protect public health and the environment. If the community has a positive bond vote, the Town can install this infrastructure, which has been a goal for 30 years.

The Planning Commission consists of 5 volunteers appointed by the Selectboard. The Planning Commission carries out short-term and long-term goals of the Town Plan.

The Outreach Committee consists of community members appointed by the Selectboard. Their goal is to provide information to the community about benefits and cost impacts of the project.

The Town Planner is the key grant writer and coordinator of the project. She has kept the project moving forward.

Consultants for this project include:

Amy Macrellis, a Senior Water Quality Specialist with Stone Environmental. Amy has 24 years of experience.

Peter Lazorchak, a Senior Engineer with Stone Environmental. He is the designer of the project. Peter has 20 years of experience.

Juli Beth Hinds, a Planning Specialist at Birchline Planning. JB has 20 years of experience planning and implementing infrastructure projects. She has developed bond and ordinance language, as well as analyzing and projecting costs to taxpayers and users.

Emily Hackett, an engineer with the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC). Emily will review all plans and projections, as well as monitor and review the project.

There is also a representative from Oakson, the drip dispersal designer.

The Selectboard's role is to determine whether to ask the community to bond. They are responsible for drafting and proposing an ordinance.

The Planning Commission implements long and short-term plans. A Town Plan has existed for decades. It determines how zoning regulations and ordinances are written. The Planning Commission's job is to implement those goals. In 1992, the Town Plan said the Town needs to provide long-term sustainability. Growth in the Town Center is critical. In 2008, the Planning Commission began looking into how to provide infrastructure for the Town Office, the Library, and Civic buildings. The existing septic is 50 years old. The leach field for the Town Office and Library is under the parking lot. When this system fails, there are no options. The Westford Common Hall has no septic, just a holding tank that must be pumped out after every event. The WCH wants to become self-sustaining and host more events, but they can't do this without septic capacity. The Red Brick Meeting House has a system behind the building. The RBMH can prepare and serve food, and they want to expand. The Town needs a robust system. Currently, there are unprecedented amounts of money available. The Town has secured \$4 million to pay for construction. Soils in Westford are terrible for in-ground systems.

2 years ago *Westford's Future* was started. There was a conversation about what Westford should and should not do. Residents were asked where they envision the Town being in 5–10 years. The majority of the community wanted more development in Town Center. Revitalization and growth can't happen without a community wastewater system.

If the Town votes to move forward, zoning will dictate growth. Zoning sets parameters. There are constraints on density, setbacks, WRO, wetlands. These control and contain zoning. Capacity means soils are great for inground wastewater disposal. The proposed site has a capacity of 24,000 gallons per day. 10,000-12,000 gallons per day will be allocated right away based on how many will connect at time of construction. The Selectboard made a policy decision to reserve at minimum 20% (4800 gallons) for future unanticipated events. This leaves 8000 gallons of unallocated capacity which can be used by existing or new development.

Presentation:

- **System Design**

Consultants from Stone Environmental presented a diagram of the 30% design. This shows the best understanding of where components might go. They have received great feedback from property owners. STEP stands for septic tank effluent pump. Each connecting property will have a septic tank made of concrete, the same as most properties already have. There is a separate chamber with a pump. The design utilizes the same technology as a pump that moves effluent from a tank to a mound. There is a low-pressure force main that will move effluent up Brookside Road to the control station. Effluent will then be dosed to 5 disposal zones using a shallow pressurize disposal system. This is the same idea as a mound system. Effluent will be time dosed.

When would construction happen? if the bond is approved, the Town must meet milestones to meet grant funding. In 2024 engineers will be working through the final design process. Work will need to be done for easements and permitting. The system will be built in 2025, with remaining components completed in 2026.

- **Costs**

JB Hinds explained that there are 2 cost components: capital cost and operating cost. Capital cost is the cost to construct. This includes costs to engineer, permit, and construct the system. Operating costs will be ongoing.

The Estimated Total Project Cost is \$3,867,000. Grant funding is equal to \$4,008,997, or 103% of the Total Project Cost. The Bond is for *up to* \$400K. The Town will only use what is needed.

Operating cost involves a contract operator who will service the system. This person gets called if there's an alarm. This is the biggest share of Operating Cost. Operating Costs include annual inspections, pumping of tanks, and capital replacement. Expenses will begin in 2026 when the system starts operating. The Town's annual cost will be about \$64K in 2027 if we use the whole \$400K bond. The Selectboard needs to develop a budget to include electrical and miscellaneous costs.

If the system is not built, we lose grant funding. Currently there are inadequate systems in the service area, which causes more unpredictability. If we move forward, costs are predictable. The system is environmentally sound.

Important Dates:

9/14/23: Selectboard meeting. Topics will include bond language, statement of necessity, and ordinance language. There may be additional special meetings.

9/23/23: Site walk from the Town Common to the disposal field. Engineers will be present.

9/28/23: Selectboard meeting. Additional wastewater issues will be discussed.

11/1/23: Public meeting run by the Selectboard to present the bond vote to the voters.

11/7/23: Bond Vote. Ballots will be mailed to voters.

10/18/23: 2nd informational wastewater meeting.

Discussion

A resident noted that the wastewater system would account for about 5% of the total Town budget. They asked if this number is fluid or fixed. Could the number go down if unallocated gallons become allocated? Gordon Gebauer replied that events can change projections. If there is no bond, there is no borrowing. As unallocated capacity is allocated to new users, the numbers will go down. The project will go out for a construction bid based on the best cost estimate. The bidding environment is fluid. The project can't move forward if bids are too high. There are no anticipated cost overruns after the construction bid. JB Hinds added that the operating contract could be more. This part of the project plan has been given a 6% inflation factor. As more people connect to the system, everyone's share goes down.

Katie Harris asked if the school becomes interested in wastewater, could the system expand down Brookside Rd? Amy Macrellis responded that they have approached school, and they are not interested in connecting. The school has a fully functioning wastewater system. Additionally, the school is south of the Village Designated area and outside the ¼ mile buffer. Grant funding requires the system be located in this area.

Andres Roy inquired about Town building usage. Would the wastewater system measure usage each month? Amy Macrellis explained that wastewater flow estimates for municipal and civic buildings are based on present usage (patrons, staff). Higher usage could request higher flow allocation. Flow would be measured daily at the control station.

Carol Winfield expressed sadness about hostile posts and emails related to this project. She feels that the project is bigger than she is comfortable with.

Joan Farmer thinks this plan is a no-brainer. The town needs to move forward. She would like to know the reasons that people would be against this project.

Maureen asked for clarification that there is a possibility that the bond could go away. JB responded that yes, it is possible that no bonded debt will need to be used.

Rosemary asked about vacant but connected houses in the service area – would they still have to pay? Amy Macrellis responded that this would be an ordinance question for the Selectboard. There is a cost to have the system there and functional. The vacant property would be on utilities standby or readiness to serve.

Kurt Cotanch asked about reserved capacity of existing buildings. Do calculations consider growth or current use? How much reserve capacity is left? Gordon Gebauer stated that the Selectboard will reserve 4800 gallons of capacity. The Town Office and Library are currently limited to 90 gallons per day. Calculations are based on conditions at this time. This will probably change to account for existing or future potential.

Annie Wiliams stated that she moved here for the peacefulness of the Town. She enjoys taking walks without running into people. She wants the town to stay the way it is.

Tom Blaine thanked the Planning Commission for their volunteer effort and time. He then asked about the lifespan of the system. Amy Macrellis explained that the minimum lifespan is 30-50 years. This is typical for a soil-based system. The system is being planned as a permanent asset for the Town. JB Hinds explained that if more people connect, costs could go down slightly. A growth in the tax base will bring numbers down. If the entire capacity is used, O&M costs will be shared by all in the service area.

Arlo asked if more use is needed, will capacity increase? Amy Macrellis responded that the initial permit is based on 24,000gpd capacity. Design flow is conservative.

Andrew Muth asked for confirmation that the need for bond debt will occur only if costs exceed the grant funding. JB Hinds confirmed that this is true.

Ira Allen values the community as it is. He asked if the PC has considered other facilities needed or the effect on services that the town already provides. He believes the town should start with potable water. There are leach fields overlapping well protection areas. 4 units per acre are possible. Ira believes that a water supply system is not too far from being required. Gordon Gebauer replied that existing properties already have their own wells. Any new structure created would need a permit from the state to connect to the wastewater system and a water supply permit. There is currently no plan to create a water supply system.

Barb Peck reiterated that there is no current plan for potable water. She thinks that businesses won't buy property without water and sewage. Barb is against this project because a contractor told her it's not big enough. She also believes that it is too expensive for the small area served. Westford has a small tax base. Barb's opinion is that if we want businesses here, this won't help. Gordon Gebauer noted the differing reasons for opposing the project. Some opponents believe that it will cause too much development, while others think that it is not big enough to support necessary development. This project falls somewhere in the middle. Again, there is no plan for a potable water source.

Susan asked if the project moves forward, what happens to existing systems? What is the cost? Amy Macrellis explained that if users connect during construction, there is no cost. Septic tanks can be crushed in place and filled, or the tank can be removed.

Katie Harris asked about emergencies. Are there alarms? Who deals with emergencies? Amy Macrellis responded that there are certain alarm conditions. If a tank is too full, there will be an alarm, and a message is sent to the contract operator. If there is a power outage, existing tanks are sized to allow a day of use. Wastewater can still be safely dosed out. People already deal with this problem during power outages. JB Hinds added that there will be a user manual. People are urged to conserve water if there is a power outage, and it is likely that their water pumps won't be operating during a power outage anyway. If needed, the contract operator can pump the septic tanks.

Meredith noted that there are no options when the library's septic system fails. It would be good to have more celebrations and events in the Town Center. She asked about the library's environmental impact if the current system fails. The Common has several brownfields. The Store wants to expand but can't. Amy Macrellis stated that the area has environmental impacts from current uses and historic uses such as petroleum. There are several benefits of a community wastewater system.

Orah Moore asked about properties in the service area that do not connect during construction. Would there be a fee to connect later? She also asked if the Pigeon property is available for any development. Gordon Gebauer responded that connections after construction will be subject to a fee established by the Selectboard. There is a cost to the Town to hold unallocated capacity. The Pigeon property is a private property that is for sale. We do not know the septic capacity for this property. It contains filled land from prior projects.

Jenny asked for details on the control building. Amy Macrellis explained that it will essentially look like a 16'X16' sugarhouse.

Jenique asked about zoning in the Common, specifically density and height. Gordon Gebauer responded that height can range from 1.5-2.5 stories based on historic building patterns and current structures. There is a higher density allowed in the Common area based on the Town Plan's goal of concentrating development in that area.

Dan Strobridge said that the main concern is the Common area. Why expand beyond the Common? Gordon Gebauer responded that the proposed location is where the available land is for a disposal site. There is no suitable land within the Common. Since 2016, the Town has owned the Maple Shade Forest. At the time of purchase, the sellers of this property alerted the Town to its septic capacity. It is a good site with good soils. It allows us to have a site for civic and municipal buildings, and other types of buildings. Amy Macrellis added that the planning area was larger. The Town Center was established for a substantially larger area than the proposed area. It has become more tightly constrained. The service area

is limited to the area immediately around the Common. The project will help protect public health and the environment and help to sustain the village core. There are concerns about the scale of the proposed system. It provides a solution that is protective and allows the village and town common to prosper into the future.

Clay Wilburn commented about piping and the leach field. It wouldn't be fair to give all of the capacity to municipal buildings but not homeowners. We should maintain historic properties. Clay noted that the proposed system has good cold weather capability because moving water won't freeze and result in blockages. There is nothing left to freeze. The larger pipes would be insulated.

Andrew Muth asked about the plan for environmental monitoring of the wells and streams. Amy Macrellis replied that this will be based on what the Indirect Discharge program will require. Similar systems have requirements for well monitoring and effluent sampling at the pump station. There may also be groundwater or surface water monitoring.

Rosemary asked about the trees. Has an arborist or consultant been contacted? What is the plan for tree replacement. Amy Macrellis explained that there will hopefully be no impact to trees. Force mains will be located in Brookside Road or along the edge of the road. The goal of the project is to have minimal tree disturbance. An arborist will be consulted.

Eliza Anderson stressed that system failure is traumatic. When the library's septic system fails, there is no solution. Giving up on \$4 million will result in regret as property values go down. This is the reality of Westford's clay soils. There is nowhere else to go.

A resident spoke about measuring flow. There has been talk of the capacity allowing 60 new homes. 8000 gallons per day are unallocated. This isn't equal to a specific number of homes. If less capacity is being used, there can be a Selectboard decision on how to use it and where to allocate. Amy Macrellis clarified that 245gpd for a single-family dwelling is 1 data point. There are many other defined uses in the EPA rules. Different flows are calculated for different uses. JB Hinds added that water supply has to be equal to usage.

A resident asked if the proposed system could expand beyond the service area if needed. Amy Macrellis responded no.

A resident asked if installed, does the proposed system limit the town in the future for more than the site can handle? Amy Macrellis replied that the existing capacity will be the future potential for addition to capacity without change to the design

Mel Allen spoke about preserving the Common. What would the Common look like after the project? Amy Macrellis answered that the Common will look no different. There will be no infrastructure in the Common. The only thing that may be seen will be risers to grade for individual effluent pump stations. These will be a box landscaped into yard or built to house controls.

Adjourn: 8:32pm