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## Seeking \$57.3M to save on sewers



Written by David Still II

### Town on fast track to qualify for state subsidy

To meet an accelerated timetable for state funding, \$57.3 million worth of sewer projects were expected to go to the town council at its May 21 meeting, with decisions to come by June 30.

That was the direction of the town council's wastewater subcommittee to get Barnstable in line for \$30 million in low- to no-interest loans from the state Department of Environmental Protection's revolving fund, plus an 8.8 percent loan subsidy. Among the requirements to qualify is to have a local funding commitment by June 30 for the entire project amount.

Appropriation requests for three projects – Wequaquet Lake sewer expansion, \$44.1 million; Stewarts Creek sewer expansion, \$3.3 million; pump station and force main, \$9.96 million – were to be introduced at the council's May 21 meeting as late filings, with hearings coming up on June 4.

What that could mean for property owners, using the rough estimates available, is a 22 percent savings in annual betterment charges over 20 years, or 8.8 percent if paid up front.

Still, the cost of these projects for property owners is expected to raise eyebrows. DPW Director Mark Ells cautioned the committee that the numbers he was presenting are only preliminary, as none of the projects have been through design.

For the 1,300 properties in the Wequaquet area, the average betterment would be about \$31,000, financed at \$1,870 annually for 20 years, even with the subsidy.

For the smaller Stewarts Creek project, the costs are lower at about \$20,500 per property, or \$1,250 annually. In May the town council approved \$3.9 million for a portion of this \$7.2 million project.

As the committee discussed moving ahead, there was an understanding that the local authorization would not compel the town to move forward. That is important for Barnstable Finance Director Mark Milne. He told the committee that there are a number of things to work out on the finances, and that he would look for the council to place some conditions on the projects to ensure the town is protected.

Chief among the unresolved finances is how betterments will be handled. A betterment is a lien placed against a property to ensure repayment of a debt. The town's current sewer policy calls for 100 percent betterments to pay for sewer expansion areas. Whether there's a willingness to revisit that

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policy to provide some relief to property owners is a discussion for the council in the coming weeks.

In an interview Thursday morning, Ells said that the initial understanding was that the state would be allocating funds over the next two years. That understanding changed over the past couple of weeks.

"We started to hear more recently that the state is going to distribute in '09, and that's it," Ells said.

The town was looking initially for the low interest loan, but the addition of state stimulus money to lower the debt burden moved things faster.

Town Manager John Klimm was briefed on the accelerated schedule. As appropriation orders, the town manager is the one to originate the request for funding to the council.

In a brief May 21 interview, Klimm said that the council is wise look at the projects because of the availability of state funding and to initiate the needed public discussion about the projects.

The only hesitation by committee members was in regards to presenting the issue to the affected residents who will foot the bill.

Getting information out to the public is a concern given the speed at which the decision needs to be made. The council has two meetings before the June 30 deadline, with budget hearings occupying much of the June 4 session.

Ells said that the town will use Channel 18, mailings and media releases to make sure residents in the affected areas are aware of the council's discussion.

Centerville councilor Tom Rugo, who's Precinct 2 encompasses Lake Wequaquet, had no reservations about moving forward.

"I think there's been a long, going dialogue about this," Rugo said.

The committee worked under an assumption that the state's interest is that the town backs the borrowing, not in the mix of local financing.

The design for the Wequaquet area was on a deliberately paced 16-month schedule to allow ample time to resolve issues that arise, Ells said. While there are a couple of issues, including placement of new pumping stations, to be worked out, Ells believes it's possible to meet the accelerated design work the funding program would require.

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