



State rep lobbies for sewer alternative in Falmouth

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FALMOUTH — Months, if not years, before the town goes to battle over a proposed sewer project, one town resident — and state lawmaker — has offered the first fighting words.

Earlier this month, state Rep. Matt Patrick, a Falmouth Democrat, sent a letter to town leaders decrying what he considers a failure on their part to fully consider alternative options to public sewers.

Faced with federal orders to reduce nitrogen counts in town waterways, town planners have worked for years to develop a comprehensive plan to address the town's nitrogen problems. They have focused most recently on the new treatment plant proposed to be built on the Massachusetts Military Reservation, along with extensions to the town sewer system south of Route 28.

The \$390 million proposal, one of several still under consideration by the town's Comprehensive Wastewater Management Planning team, would allow the town to reduce nitrogen in its waterways without getting into a turf war over the location of the new plant, supporters say.

But, in failing to give equal consideration to other less expensive, equally effective nitrogen reduction options, town planners could cost residents thousands of dollars, Patrick wrote in the letter, sent to the selectmen and the board of health, among other state and local officials.

A study commissioned by the town's wastewater management team dismisses the alternative systems without fair consideration, he wrote.

"The town of Falmouth must consider ... more than a 'business as usual' engineering approach to our future wastewater treatment," wrote Patrick, who asked that the town conduct a more thorough study of alternative systems and form a blue-ribbon committee to weigh the systems versus traditional sewers.

"This is the largest and most expensive problem that the town will ever have to negotiate," he wrote. "We must get the answer right the first time."

Patrick's letter, sent last week, followed a vote by the Barnstable Town Council to forgo several planned sewer extension projects due largely to concerns over the cost.

Towns across the Cape are working to find ways to decrease nitrogen counts in local waterways. Nitrogen and other nutrients feed the growth of algae and other organisms in water, resulting in decreased clarity and oxygen levels.

In Falmouth, the current proposal, which would add about 6,000 homes to the town's sewer system, would locate a new regional treatment plant, likely to serve Falmouth and other neighboring towns, at the site of the current plant on the military reservation. It will likely go to state environmental office for review sometime early this fall. If approved, it will then go before voters on the town ballot.

Falmouth officials, who are still shaping the plan, are considering two different funding options, according to Gerald Potamis, the town's wastewater superintendent.

The first option would cover the costs entirely through property taxes, likely adding about 83 cents to the tax rate over a 25-year period, he said. That would likely mean an additional \$330 per year for a home valued at \$400,000, according to town records.

The second option would pay for the project through a combination of property taxes, which would cover 30 percent of the costs, and betterment fees, which would cover 70 percent. Under this option, the project would likely add

about 40 cents to the tax rate, or \$160 per year for a \$400,000 home, and customers who use the sewer service would be charged a \$31,000 betterment, to be paid either in one lump sum or over 20 years.

According to Patrick, that money could be better spent on alternative systems, like Urine Diversion toilets, which separates urine and feces and dispatches the urine as fertilizer.

Such systems, more popular outside the United States than within, have proven to reduce nitrogen counts at significantly lesser costs than sewers, Patrick contends in his letter.

But such benefits have not been proven, said Potamis. Americans have not shown a willingness to use the different model of toilet required, and the systems have not yet been approved under state plumbing code.

"I'm not running ... a research study," said Potamis, who heads the town's wastewater management project. "The real bottom line is, if it isn't legal and it can't remove nitrogen, why should the town of Falmouth fund research for the rest of the country?"

But other town officials wonder why, with thousands of dollars on the line, the town wouldn't take a deeper look.

"We're looking at a situation where we're asking people to spend tens of thousands of dollars," Selectman Brent Putnam said yesterday. "When it comes time to really discuss this, it doesn't work if you've got an inadequate review of the technology."