

Selling a big sewer project

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Wequaquet Lake area owners want wastewater answers

By David Still II

When Department of Public Works officials walked into a Sunday afternoon meeting at the Barnstable Senior Center in November to discuss the next steps in the sewer project around Wequaquet Lake, they quickly realized one thing: by and large, no one really understood what it is all about.

While there have been a number of outreach programs, DPW Director Mark Ells said there clearly needs to be more.

What became clear in November is that many residents don't have a solid understanding of why the project is seen as necessary and what it will mean to their pocket-books.

The Wequaquet Lake project was identified in 1998 by the town as its top priority for additional sewers. It is not a project required by any state or local mandate, but the town's board of health, as well as Ells and other town officials, are convinced of its need.

The biggest part of the project now is to find the community consensus for its need, Ells said.

Based on the November meeting, town staff understands that much more work needs to be done in the community to explain the entire project to the affected residents.

Like all other town sewer projects since state and federal reimbursements dried up a decade and a half ago, 100 percent of the cost of the project will be borne by the residents in the affected areas through annual sewer betterments. These amount to 20-year payment plans included as part of property tax bills. The average betterment for the project is expected to be in the \$13,000 to \$18,000 range.

Ells said that the project area, which includes Wequaquet Lake and its immediate neighbors of Shallow and Bearse's ponds and Long Pond to the south, has about 1,300 households that would be connected to town sewer as a result of this project.

There may be additional costs depending on how the work is finally approved. The hilly terrain

around the lake and throughout the project area means that about half of the homes to be connected will require grinder pumps to get the effluent from the house to the sewer pipe. The policy for the other 200 or so such pumps now in operation is that they are privately bought, installed and maintained. That could change, but it would also require a change in how betterments and sewer rates are applied. That's work still to be done and decisions to be made.

In an article prepared for the *Patriot* last week, Director of Community Services Jemma Lambert indicated that there's still time to affect the public policy decisions this project presents.

"The debate about whether or not to proceed with the Lake Wequaquet project is by no means over. Homeowners, public officials, and other concerned citizens will continue to evaluate the merits of the proposal," Lambert wrote.

Ells agrees. He said that such a process could extend the overall schedule, but if that time is needed to develop a consensus among residents, he said it's time that will be taken.

The Residents

Hid Welch, president of the 260-member Wequaquet Lake Protective Association (WLPA), understands that more work is needed to build the baseline understanding among residents on the lake, to have the full conversation on the project.

The WLPA has not taken a formal position and is awaiting the time when residents are comfortable with the information before going on record one way or another.

"There needs to be more education for the people on the lake to make intelligent decisions," Welch said.

The board of the WLPA is mixed on the project, he said, with some strongly in favor and others equally as opposed.

Welch looks back at the November meeting, at which 400 to 500 lake residents gathered, as a missed opportunity to get good information out.

"It confused more people than it helped," Welch said, indicating that the DPW staff present was not equipped to handle all of the

questions residents had, especially those dealing with state and town health regulations.

"I felt that this was a horrible mistake," he said.

Welch expressed his dissatisfaction about that meeting with Ells, who doesn't entirely disagree.

To help foster a better understanding, Welch is including items about the sewer project in the upcoming WLPA newsletter, which he expects to be ready next week.

The issues around the lake regarding community consensus is the leading edge for what's expected to be a many decades-long discussion, debate and implementation of wastewater management across town. New sewers or treatment options, all costing money and all likely to be paid through some form of betterment, will be recommended for other parts of town, and the next likely area, though not immediate, will be in the three bays, where there is abundant information about the effects of failing septic systems.

Information about the project is available through the town's Web site, www.town.barnstable.ma.us, which provides a link to the Tighe & Bond Web site, www.tighebond.com.

What will it cost?

The \$18 million project has the following estimated costs which are likely to be borne by homeowners. They include:

- Per household betterment = \$13,000 to \$18,000. Low-interest loans available. Amortized over 20 years, the cost to homeowner is estimated to be \$1,000 per year. One-time cost.
- Grinder Pump = \$7,500. Not necessary for all homeowners. These pumps will require servicing periodically. Pumps have a useful life of approximately 10 years.
- Tie-in costs per household = \$1,000 to \$5,000 (dependent upon several variables). One-time cost.
- Average user fees = \$400. Annual cost.