

Finance Committee Recommendation for Wastewater Treatment Facility Upgrade

The Finance Committee has been meeting with the Sewer Department and the Board of Selectmen regarding the North Brookfield Wastewater Treatment Facility Upgrade Project. There will be a ballot vote at the upcoming election on this project to see if the town will vote to override the Proposition 2 ½ debt exclusion to fund this project in November.

There are many rumors surrounding the project and its impact on our residents. We would like to try to dispel some of the rumors. The sewer department has been mandated by the state to reduce the amount of phosphorous being expended from our facility. The facility has until April 1, 2024 to complete this mandated upgrade. If the facility does not meet this deadline, the town could be subject to fines of up to \$25,000 per day until it is done.

The mandated part of the upgrade will cost approximately \$4.5 million. The balance of the project is for areas of the plant that are coming to the end of their useful life. Repairs and upgrades are being included in the project in an effort to get the most in aid, grants and financial assistance. If the project were to be done in phases, the amount of financing aid would be greatly reduced putting a larger burden on the taxpayers.

The plant has been working with an engineer to look at possible grants for which the project may qualify. We have been told that with the cost of the project, the fees currently paid by sewer users and the average income of the town, we fall into a guideline for the grants which would cover up to 75% of the cost. Unfortunately, we will not have the final monetary amounts for both grants and final costs of the project until construction is complete.

There has been question as to why the whole town should be paying for a project that benefits the 900 sewer users in town. There are a few answers to that question.

- First, if the majority of the town votes no to the project, then those who use the sewer facility will need to absorb the costs of the project, both the state mandated and the upgrades. This possibility could financially ruin some homeowners.
- Second, if the project is not approved by the voters and the mandates are not completed, the whole town (including non-users) will be liable for the daily fines imposed by the DEP.
- Third, for those who feel that they don't get any benefit from facility because they have a private septic system, that isn't exactly true. We, as a town, do benefit from sewer facility. Our public safety, town offices, public schools, etc. are all users of the facility. We have businesses in town who are users of the facility. These businesses are not only employers in our community but also tax payers which help all of us with our own tax rates.
- Finally, we do have some projects that are nearing the end of their financing and will be paid off soon. If we can get the 75% in grants, then the increase to our taxes will be about the same as what we have now. We could easily have this entire project paid off in 20 years if we get the full 75%.

This is not an easy decision. There are many in town who are on fixed incomes and are sewer users. There are many more in town who have private septic systems. The argument has been made that no one helped those homeowners to install their systems and/or maintain them. However, we will all pay if the upgrades are not done. And doing everything together to take advantage of the most in grants will actually cost less than just doing the mandated part of the project and phasing in the rest.

Ultimately the decision is yours and will be made in the voting booth. But the Finance Committee would like to give our support for the project and hope you will also.