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EPA's discharge rules questioned

Blackstone water not improved

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WORCESTER— A consultant for the Upper Blackstone Water Pollution Abatement District says there is no scientific evidence that new federal requirements aimed at reducing the levels of nitrogen and phosphorus discharged into the Blackstone River from the regional wastewater treatment plant in Millbury will improve the river's water quality.

Jane E. Madden, vice president at the Cambridge-based Camp Dresser & McKee Inc., last night raised several questions about the draft permit issued by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, which wants the Upper Blackstone's treatment plant to meet significantly more stringent nutrient discharge limits.

Ms. Madden said the Upper Blackstone is already in the midst of a \$180 million program to improve water quality based on discharge limits agreed to in 2001. Because the district has until 2009 to achieve those limits, she argued that the EPA should first assess the impact of the results from those improvements before mandating even lower nitrogen and phosphorus discharge limits.

The cost to upgrade the Upper Blackstone plant to meet those more stringent limits has been estimated at between \$100 million to \$200 million.

"The timing is not right and the science is not justified," Ms. Madden told the City Council Public Works Committee last night. "There will also be a significant economic and environmental cost to this. It makes sense to first assess the impact of the improved discharge from the plant before reducing the limits even more. By 2009, the phosphorus load from the Upper Blackstone (plant) will be less than the load from other sources along the Blackstone River."

She added that the regional wastewater treatment plant in Millbury is one of only 29 plants — out of nearly 17,000 similar facilities nationwide — being targeted by the EPA for lower phosphorous limits.

Representatives of the Upper Blackstone district met with the Public Works Committee to discuss strategies in building a case to oppose the EPA draft permit. A public hearing on the permit will be held at 7 p.m. May 9 at Quinsigamond Community College. The 60-day comment period ends May 16.

The EPA draft permit for the wastewater treatment plant is of particular

interest to the city because Worcester is the largest member of the Upper Blackstone district. The district plant on Route 20 serves Worcester, Holden, Auburn, West Boylston and Millbury. Each community pays part of the costs, with Worcester pitching in 90 percent because of its larger percentage of sewage flow.

As a result, Worcester water users bear the biggest brunt of improvements made to the plant.

Robert L. Moylan Jr., commissioner of public works and parks, said the cost for Worcester ratepayers to finance the Upper Blackstone's current \$180 million improvement project is about \$150 per household annually. He said if the Upper Blackstone has to make further improvements to meet the more stringent nutrient discharge limits, ratepayers would likely have to pay an additional \$150 per household annually.

In addition, ratepayers would likely have to come up with another \$50 to \$100 annually to cover the plant's increased operating costs because of the need to use more chemicals in the treatment process.

The average combined water/sewer bill for Worcester homeowners is already more than \$600 a year.

Mr. Moylan added that the city's annual assessment to the Upper Blackstone district has increased by 109 percent in the past four years, driven in large part by the plant improvement project. He said the Upper Blackstone assessment used to represent 19 percent of the city's sewer bill and now it accounts for 43 percent.

"It's totally illogical (for EPA) to impose more stringent limits when we are only halfway through the (plant) upgrade process," Mr. Moylan said.

District 3 Councilor Paul P. Clancy Jr., chairman of the Public Works Committee, said he finds it irrational to make Worcester ratepayers bear a greater financial burden for improving the water quality of the Blackstone River while little is being done to reduce the amount of phosphorus discharged at other points along the river.

"This is probably one of the most unfair things I've seen in my 20 years in city government," Mr. Clancy said. "It's grossly unfair and we're going to fight it, and fight it to win."