

Article published Apr 21, 2007
Apr 21, 2007

Locals gather opposition to EPA mandate

Sewer treatment improvements called unjustified

By Milton J. Valencia TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF

WORCESTER— City councilors sent an early, strong sign of opposition to proposed upgrades to the Upper Blackstone wastewater treatment facility, saying they are based on faulty science that could triple what ratepayers pay.

The council subcommittee's opposition to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's proposed mandates could be an indicator of battles ahead, pitting a city's ability to pay for the required upgrades against federal efforts to clean up the river.

The Blackstone River Coalition, which has been working for decades to clean up the river, supports the EPA mandates, saying the treatment facility is only one agency that has been asked to upgrade its plant for the sake of the river.

But consultants working for the Upper Blackstone Water Pollution Abatement District, which runs the treatment plant that serves Worcester and area towns, said the mandates do not take into account the ongoing renovations to the facility.

"We're not fighting the environment, we're fighting the process that has been imposed on us," said District 3 Councilor Paul P. Clancy, chairman of the council's committee on public works.

The committee held a summit yesterday at City Hall, inviting the area's state and federal legislative delegations to hear a consultant's reports on the upgrades and seeking their help in opposing the mandates. The committee agreed to recommend that the full council officially oppose the mandates and call for further studies on the issues.

Specifically, the committee asked those in attendance and the area's political leaders to voice their opposition at an EPA public hearing on the proposed mandates. The hearing will be at 7 p.m. May 9 at Quinsigamond Community College, and is part of the public process whenever the agency proposes mandates.

The mandates are in the draft permit the EPA issued for the plant, located in Millbury. Permits are for five years.

The draft permit calls for the reduction of phosphorus and nitrogen nutrients the plant releases into the Blackstone River, which runs from Worcester to Providence and into Narragansett Bay. The nutrients increase algae and other plant life that, when they die, reduce oxygen in the water and spoil the fish population, an EPA spokesman has said.

The EPA has attributed low oxygen levels in the bay to the Blackstone River and in part

to the wastewater treatment facility, located at the head of the river.

Robert L. Moylan, the city's commissioner of public works and chairman of the Abatement District, said that the district is already spending \$180 million on renovations to the plant that will cut nitrogen and phosphorous levels. The project will be completed in 2009, and by then will have doubled sewer rates to more than \$400.

Dave Deegan, a spokesman for the EPA, said new standards require more of a reduction in the nutrient levels. He said the increases to ratepayers will be minimal compared to the benefits to the environment.

But Mr. Moylan said the more stringent standards proposed will boost the cost of renovations another \$200 million, putting more of a burden on ratepayers, who could see their yearly bills jump to \$700.

The specific problem, Mr. Moylan said, is that the mandates are based on faulty studies that attribute the high levels of nitrogen and phosphorous to the wastewater treatment plant. He said that other points along the 40-mile river will contribute more nutrients to the river than the plant will after 2009, when the current renovations are done.

Mr. Moylan questioned how the EPA could request new upgrades before judging the upgrades that are ongoing.

Tom Walsh, director of the treatment plant, said the ongoing mandates make it difficult to plan renovations to the facility when the EPA mandates are continuous.

He called for an agreement with the EPA that would postpone the mandates until a review of the current upgrades can be done. By that time, a district-commissioned study of the river and its tributaries will be completed, serving as a further scientific reference. And, at that point, the city can lobby for the federal government to fund its own mandates.

State Sen. Harriette L. Chandler, D-Worcester, called on the city to seek support from the other towns the plant serves, saying they will face the same financial hardships.

Councilor-at-Large Frederick C. Rushton said the city should do its part to promote environmental cleanup, and has already, but that the EPA should consider the whole river when looking for ways to reduce nutrients entering the water.

"We're one-eighth of the river," he said, urging officials to test all contaminant sources along the river.

Donna Williams, president of the Blackstone River Coalition, said there has been a holistic approach to cleaning up the river. "The Upper Blackstone is not the only issue on the river," she said.

She stressed that the current upgrades being made to the treatment facility are based on negotiations that occurred in 1996. She said the city should not waste another 13 years before taking more action to help clean the river.

"When you flush the toilet at City Hall, it goes to the Upper Blackstone," she said.

Copyright 2007 Worcester Telegram & Gazette Corp.