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City blasts EPA for costly new regulations

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WORCESTER— Worcester officials are amassing opposition to new federal requirements that would boost the cost of ongoing renovations to the regional wastewater treatment plant in Millbury, further burdening residents whose rates have tripled over the last several years.

The proposed requirements come as the plant is managing a \$176 million renovation, and could boost the renovation cost another \$200 million.

City officials blasted the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency for basing the requirements on what they called questionable scientific studies. The requirements, they said, are another example of unfunded federal mandates that pass costs directly to ratepayers.

“Enough is enough,” City Manager Michael V. O’Brien said yesterday, during a tour of the Millbury plant. “This cannot be passed along to the Worcester ratepayer.”

The Upper Blackstone Water Pollution Abatement 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.

In 2001, the plant agreed to a multi-phased renovation totaling \$176 million, in compliance with new federal environmental protection standards. The renovations are expected to be completed in 2009.

Worcester ratepayers’ annual bills have jumped from about \$30 in 2002, when renovations started, to more than \$100. By 2010, bills could be \$150 per year for the average single-family home, according to Worcester statistics.

The plant must renew its permit with the EPA, however, and a new list of mandates threatens to boost the cost of renovations, possibly doubling residents’ rates to \$300 by the time the work is complete.

“We all thought it’d be the end of the project, but that’s not the case here,” said Worcester District 3 City Councilor Paul P. Clancy Jr., chairman of the council’s committee on public works.

He said councilors never expected when they approved the project years ago that the government would “come back and say, ‘you know what, we’re going to double this.’”

“We certainly can’t afford another hammering to the ratepayers and the taxpayers of Worcester,” he said.

At issue are the levels of nitrogen and phosphorus the plant releases when it discharges treated water into the Blackstone River, which flows into Narragansett Bay in Rhode Island. Environmental officials have attributed low oxygen levels in the bay to the Blackstone River, and in part to the wastewater treatment facility and to companies that border the river.

David Deegan, a spokesman for the EPA, said the ongoing renovations will reduce the release of nitrogen and phosphorus agents, but not to the level required under new standards.

He explained that the phosphorous and nitrogen nutrients increase algae and other plant life that, when they die, reduce oxygen in the water.

“It’s a less healthy ecosystem,” he said. “It’s not able to sustain the eco-life and fish and water systems that you would want to see.”

He stressed that the proposed recommendations for the new permit are still in the public input process, and that anyone can offer recommendations. A public hearing is scheduled for May 9, and the public comment period ends May 16.

“We certainly look carefully at all the comments, whether they’re for or against or identifying an alternative method that has not been considered,” Mr. Deegan said.

He stressed that the state has a revolving fund that could provide low-interest loans for the project. And, he said, the average increase in rates for a household, while his agency takes them seriously, will not rise to a hardship that will balance with concerns for the environment.

“There certainly will be a lot of environmental benefits from this permit moving forward,” he said. “Our bottom line has always been improving protection for public health and improving protection for the environment.”

City officials, who toured the plant yesterday in preparation for a public campaign to oppose the proposed mandates, stressed that the new regulations would further burden ratepayers.

The EPA’s reasoning behind the new requirements is scientifically flawed, contradicting

other studies and the opinion of the agency's own advisory board, said Robert L. Moylan, Worcester's commissioner of public works.

Mr. Moylan, who is also chairman of the facility's board of directors through his role with the city, said that the ongoing renovations of the wastewater treatment plant will actually reduce nitrogen and phosphorus levels below those of other sites that drain into the Blackstone River.

He said a deeper examination of the Blackstone River is needed before the treatment plant discharges are blamed for the phosphorus and nitrogen levels.

Mr. Moylan joined with city councilors yesterday in calling for the campaign to oppose the new EPA mandates. The City Council has planned a summit April 20 with the area's congressional delegation to oppose the new regulations.

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