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The camel's back

EPA order adds to onerous municipal burden

We'll leave it to the politicians and experts to thrash out whether the EPA's recent order of another major upgrade of the Upper Blackstone wastewater treatment plant reflects environmental necessity or bureaucratic arrogance. But wherever the truth lies, the appalled reaction of city officials certainly is justified.

The Environmental Protection Agency has determined that nutrient levels in the Blackstone River are too high, promoting growth of algae and other organisms that decompose and reduce oxygen in the water below healthy levels. Indeed, while the river has come a long way in the past generation, it undoubtedly has yet to reach the pristine near-drinkable state most residents would consider ideal.

Still, the river certainly has been greatly improved. Under federal mandate under the 1972 Clean Water Act, area communities have invested heavily in the cleanup effort. Worcester, in conjunction with Auburn, Holden, Millbury and West Boylston, established the Upper Blackstone Water Pollution Abatement District. The district is in the midst of a \$176 million renovation scheduled to be completed in 2009 — a mandate largely responsible for a three-fold increase in rates.

Clouding the issue is skepticism about the scientific foundation of the order. The reasoning behind it, according to DPW commissioner Robert L. Moylan, is contradicted by other studies and the EPA's own advisory board. Also open to debate is the assumption that the main cause of high nutrient levels is discharges from the treatment plant — as opposed to surface runoff and other largely uncontrolled non-point sources.

In different circumstances, local officials might have taken the new EPA order in stride, despite doubts about the cost-benefit of the estimated \$200 million in upgrades. At a time when residents may be asked to accept higher tax bills and reduced services to close a potential \$21 million budget gap, the specter of more steep increases in water rates is hard to accept.

Wanton pollution of waterways is unjustified, unwise and illegal. But with municipal costs for health insurance, pensions, fuel and other expenses rising far in excess of revenue growth, it is little wonder that cash-strapped municipal officials view the EPA order as the straw that will break the camel's back.

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