

Article published May 10, 2007
May 10, 2007

City, environmentalists spar over wastewater upgrade

High costs, effectiveness queried

By Mark Melady TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF
mmelady@telegram.com

WORCESTER— City officials lined up last night to tell federal environmental officials that their plans to require the Millbury sewer-treatment plant to remove phosphorous and nitrogen nutrients from the wastewater dumped into the Blackstone River are too early, too expensive and based on shaky science.

Nonsense, responded environmentalists, scientists and canoeists.

"It is unfair, misleading and irresponsible to say there is no scientific basis for the removal of nutrients from the river", Jan Plasse, a consultant to the Blackstone River Coalition, said at last night's hearing held by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. "Both the river and the people deserve better than these slogans and rhetoric."

City Councilors Paul P. Clancy Jr., Philip P. Palmieri and Frederick C. Rushton all questioned the timing, the upgrade's cost and how effective nutrient removal would be to the river and Narragansett Bay. District 2 Councilor Palmieri had a little ditty for the EPA.

"We all want to be clean, we all want to be green and we certainly don't want the EPA to be mean", Mr. Palmieri recited.

At issue is the Millbury plant officially known as the Upper Blackstone Water Pollution Abatement District, undergoing a \$180 million upgrade mandated in a 2001 permit. The EPA is proposing a new permit to remove nutrients, an upgrade that could cost as much as \$200 million more.

Philip Guerin, Worcester's water resources coordinator, said flatly, "The city cannot afford to meet the permit requirements." He pointed out that the city's average household income is \$37,000 — some \$20,000 less than the state average — and that sewer bills have risen dramatically in recent years to pay for the 2001 upgrade.

Mr. Guerin said the EPA's guiding philosophy seems to be "we'll spend \$200 million and then we'll study the bay and see what happens."

He said the proposal "lacks significantly proven benefits" because it has not been shown that removing phosphorous and nitrogen would greatly improve water quality. "There needs to be definitive assessments," Mr. Guerin said.

But environmentalists said evidence clearly shows the detrimental effect nutrients have on the river.

Marci L. Cole Ekberg of Save The Bay said 95 percent of the eel grass that provides a habitat to many species is gone. Jim Plasse of the Blackstone River Watershed Association said that on a recent canoeing trip the phosphorous foam was so thick it made nearby canoes invisible.

Donna Williams, president of the Blackstone River Coalition, said the river is "overwhelmed by nutrients." She said the city has done a good job managing sewer costs, noting that the average \$381 sewer bill is more than \$50 below the state average of \$440.

Industrialist Ralph Capalbo Jr., president of New Method Plating Co. Inc. on Hammond Street, said the goal of perfect water is not worth the high cost.

"Is it time we stop to reflect on how clean is clean?" Mr. Capalbo asked. "If we've achieved 99 percent of our goal with the expenditure of the millions of public and private dollars that have been spent so far, is it fiscally responsible to spend millions more to say that we are perfect?"

Jane Madden, vice president with Camp, Dresser & McKee, the city's sewage consultant, said substantial environmental costs are associated with the EPA's plant upgrade.

"The new plant would use more power, it would use more natural gas, it would increase emissions and it would create more ash to dispose of," Ms. Madden said. "And for what gain? It's just not right."