

TOWN OF HARVARD

TOWN CENTER SEWER ACTION GROUP

A Sub-Committee of the Harvard Board of Selectmen



Frequently Asked Sewer Questions

Will my property tax be affected by the betterment of my property with installation the sewer system?

There is no real estate assessment criteria for sewer connection that would affect your assessment. If sales of homes connected to sewer sold at a premium, assessed values would eventually reflect that market data.

Why upgrade the waste water treatment infrastructure?

Adding residential flow would provide a warmer environment and a steadier, more nutritionally balanced diet for the microorganisms that actually process the nutrients and help plant operations, but problems with clogging of the media that supports the microorganisms, ground water infiltration to the collection system near the schools, and the need for transfer pump upgrades and installation of flow equalization tank capacity to buffer peak flows all need to be addressed.

How is the WWTP upgrade cost divided among the taxpayers?

After consideration by the committee and the Board of Selectmen it was decided that a fair approach would be to assign 62% of the cost to be carried by private participants of the sewer system and the remaining 38% of the cost to be bourn by the taxpayers. This larger portion of cost reflects costs the Town would incur regardless of whether the sewer project goes forward.

Why was a low pressure sewer system design selected?

A low pressure system would be less expensive to install than a gravity system. The pipe size is smaller, not buried as deep since it doesn't need a fixed slope which minimizing the cost risks of ledge removal and may be run uphill eliminating a number of costly pumps stations needed to serve a gravity system. At the same time this system allows flexibility in that the collection system could be adapted to evolving needs over time.

Why Special Legislation?

The Home Rule Petition or Special Act would adopt most of the applicable state sewer laws with a few key differences. The MA General Laws provide a general right to connect to the sewer. The special act takes exception to this right to connect and includes growth neutral language that limits growth enabled solely by the availability of sewer service and assures that the Town can reserve capacity for those property owners who choose not to connect right away. The act has more flexibility in interest rates charged and the repayment period for betterment charges which get paid over time to minimize costs to system users over time. The act also provides flexibility to redefine the service area in the future should the Town need to address sewer issues elsewhere in town.

What is a “betterment”?

Service by a public sewer is an improvement over on-site wastewater disposal (i.e. septic systems, etc.) of such lasting duration that it is considered to be in perpetuity. Therefore, when a municipality constructs public sewers, the value of those properties abutting the sewer line are said to have been improved or "bettered". In Massachusetts, sewer betterments are governed by Chapters 80 and 83 (excluding Sections 1 and 2 of Chapter 80) and are under the jurisdiction of the Department of Revenue. Sewer betterment assessments are monies intended to pay back all or a portion of the debt service of the "local share" of the sewer construction and associated engineering capital costs.

Do I have to pay betterment if I don't connect?

Under the recommendation of the TCSAG the only way this project would be financially viable is if the was complete participation. As such the betterment fee would have to be mandatory though connection is optional.

How much are betterment charges and when would I have to pay them?

The betterment assessment for a single family home is projected at \$17,000. Assessments can be paid in full when assessed or apportioned and paid over time. Current projections using State Revolving Funds show betterment payments over twenty years come to about \$1,100 per year.

When I sell my house or business, will I need a Title V compliant system?

Absolutely! Properties having private wastewater disposal systems of any kind must prove that they have (or will have) a Title V compliant system before the property can be transferred. Properties connected to a municipal wastewater disposal system are relieved of this, often costly, requirement.

Are betterment payments tax deductible?

Interest is fully tax deductible. Most bank escrow statements report simply report taxes and betterment assessments as local real estate taxes.

What will happen to any unpaid betterment assessment balances when my property is sold?

Most communities have the betterment paid off when the property is sold or the title is transferred.

I just installed a Title V compliant private system at great expense, why should I be required to pay into a municipal system?

Except for the annual betterment charge, you wouldn't be required to do so. When, and whether, to connect into and use the municipal system, except in cases of private system failure as determined by the Board of Health, will be an individual property owner's decision.

If I don't connect right away, will I be able to connect at a later date?

Yes. While reserving capacity means that the Town continues to pay the annual operating cost of any unused capacity, the Selectmen decided that anyone who has paid a betterment should have a right to connect to the system for a period of up to thirty years (period corresponding to betterment repayment period).

Will connection costs increase over time?

Most likely they will. Since the town carries the cost of unused treatment capacity, it is in the public interest to encourage individual connection to the system as soon as possible. Reduced connection costs will be an incentive for early connection.

What if I can't afford the one time connection costs?

As an incentive to initial connection, we anticipate that property owners who connect right away will be allowed to pay a portion of the connection costs over time. Grinder pump costs and connection fees would certainly qualify. A state program provides funds to allow individual property owners to borrow the costs for sewer/septic upgrades; the Town will apply to participate in this program.

Could the town construct a municipal only system?

Yes, such a system could be constructed to service only the municipal properties in the center. Although technically feasible, it fails to support the goals and recommendations for the town center contained in the Harvard Master Plan and Town Center Plan and would incur all of the permitting and design costs necessary for the full proposed sewer district. Such a system would not benefit the operation of the current plant as municipal sewage is very similar to the current schools effluent. A municipal only system would do nothing to eliminate the residential and business septic systems located in the DEP interim well head protection area that surrounds our town wells on Pond Road. Finally, the Town would bear all the capital costs and annual operational & maintenance costs, with no offset in overall costs to the town from private capital and operating cost contributions.

I've heard that the school treatment plant is now operating within DEP permitted guidelines, so why do I also hear that the plant's efficiency would be improved by the addition of residential inflows?

Wayne C. Perry, P.E. of Norfolk Ram Group, the professional engineer who has been involved with our facility since its construction, replies: "Currently the wastewater treatment facility (WWTF) is operating within permit limits. However, the addition of more consistent flow rates with more BOD (dissolved solids) and lower nitrogen demands would only help in maintaining the Plant's proper operation. The lack of flow during school summer vacation as well as the three, one week school-year vacations, only compounds the difficulties in keeping the WWTF in compliance with its discharge permit. The added residential flow will provide a better "buffer" for the plant should there be any sudden changes in the plant's influent quality or flow quantity."

What happens now during the summer school vacation? How will the minimal summer flows affect the plant's operation come fall when schools re-open?

Again, Wayne Perry of NRG replies: "During summer months the Plant basically recycles flow within the treatment components and has little or no discharge to the groundwater. This is obviously not an efficient way to operate the Plant. When the flow picks up in the fall, it takes a lot of extra effort and the addition of "bugs" and chemicals to get the plant up and operating properly again. Plus if there is any kind of a Plant upset during the summer, it would be extremely difficult to have the Plant return to proper operation in a reasonably short period of time, and thereby stay in compliance with the discharge limits. The low flow reduces the Plant's buffering capacity to withstand any abnormal influent parameters. Further, with the residential wastewater the quantity of available carbon in the wastewater is increased, thereby reducing the Plant's need for an outside carbon source, such as Methanol. This will result in lower operations cost for the Plant."

What is involved in decommissioning my existing septic system?

The pipe to the septic tank is disconnected when the grinder pump is installed. The septic tank then has to be pumped out by a licensed septic hauler and the tank must be filled with sand or other material to render it unusable.

What happens if interest rates or construction costs go way up, won't I be faced with huge betterment increases?

This is not likely because:

- 1) State Revolving Fund costs are expected to be stable.
- 2) Our construction cost estimates are conservative and include a substantial 20% contingency.
- 3) There are financial circuit breakers in the Selectmen's Financing Model that require the project to come back to Town Meeting if certain cost thresholds are exceeded.

What is the timeline for the sewer project?

Pursuant to an affirmative vote for Article 24 and 25 and passage of the debt exclusion ballot question, application for funding would be made this year, with design and documentation completed in 2010 and construction in 2011.

Can the district be changed or expanded?

Yes. The Sewer Commission can recommend changes to the district for Town Meeting approval if needs change over time.

How will the Town Meeting decision on sewer be implemented?

The Board of Selectmen have created a structure for a Sewer Build Sewer Building Committee to work through the issues of implementation and construction if the project moves forward.

Why do we need a \$2 million debt exclusion right now, won't the costs be incurred incrementally over time?

The full debt authorization provides the legal "standing" and authority to apply for the funding.

What happens if the project is not approved?

First, Town Meeting should approve Article 26 to fund needed design work for the waste water treatment plant repairs and upgrades to assure continued compliance with our discharge water quality permit. Beyond that, the project will be stalled until we as a community are willing to consider the issue again.

Meanwhile, property owners, including the Town, will be on their own for solving their Title 5 compliance issues. It is possible that if the Town fixes the waste water treatment facility's various issues and finds a septic solution for the old library, there may never be the public will to proceed with a town center sewer system.