

Whitingham Wastewater System Improvements

This March at Town Meeting, the Town of Whitingham will have a special ballot asking all residents whether they should approve a bond for the improvements to the two wastewater treatment facilities (WWTFs) in the villages of Whitingham and Jacksonville.

Why am I being asked to vote on this? I'm on my own septic system.

Why is the entire town being asked to approve a project that will benefit only those on Town sewer? Due to the funding source for this project (Vermont's State Revolving Loan Fund Program, or "SRF Program"), the Selectboard needs the authorization of all its voters, not just those who use Town sewer. **The costs for this project will be borne ONLY by those connected to the Whitingham or Jacksonville WWTFs, residents on septic systems will see no tax increases by voting yes!**

Why is this project needed?

The Whitingham and Jacksonville WWTFs were built in the early 1980s with an intended service life of 20 years. These plants performed far beyond all expectations and still continue to operate to this day. That said, once these facilities exceeded their service life, repair costs began to increase. Some parts, like pumps or building roofs, were replaced or repaired. Other parts failed and were not put back into service as the WWTFs were still able to treat sewage.

Then in 2018 a larger piece of equipment at the Jacksonville plant that is responsible for eliminating pollutants in the wastewater failed. The failure of the Jacksonville Rotating Biological Contactor (RBC) required a shutdown of the plant while repairs were made. Sewage that continued to flow to the Jacksonville WWTF had to be pumped and hauled to Brattleboro for disposal. This repair and hauling cost of nearly \$100,000.00 depleted the reserve fund. After this incident, the State of Vermont required the Town to perform a comprehensive analysis of the two facilities to identify what other components were at risk of failure and need replacement. The goal of this analysis was to provide a look forward to the next 20 years to ensure that residents continue to have the benefit of a centralized WWTF.

A WWTF is a crucial piece of municipal infrastructure that protects the environment and fosters economic growth. Craft brewers often look to villages with municipal treatment plants for locations as their wastewater is more easily treated by a WWTF than with an on-site septic system (i.e. leachfield).

What does this project include?

The project proposed by our engineers consist of a complete rehabilitation of both the Whitingham and Jacksonville WWTFs. It brings both buildings up to modern code, with improvements to insulation, ventilation and lighting that will make it more energy efficient. All of the process equipment will be replaced, providing a new 20-year service life and reduced repair costs.

The project also includes improvements to the collection system. Over the years, the manholes in the road have deteriorated, allowing rainwater and groundwater to enter the

sewer network, increasing the amount of water needed to be treated. This project will “tighten up” the collection system so the sewer plants only treat sewage instead of rainwater or groundwater.

Who Pays for this project?

The actual cost for this project will be borne solely by the users of the municipal sewer system. The Town is participating in the SRF Program which provides long-term, low-interest loans to municipalities. In addition to the loan, the SRF Program also includes additional subsidies that can further reduce the price of the project. This includes up to \$800,000 to cover construction costs. It could also include more subsidies that would come from the federal government as part of an infrastructure bill.

What happens if this bond is not approved?

Voting no on this bond will not keep sewer rates at their current level in the long term. Without the bond, the sewer users will be solely responsible for keeping the two WWTFs operational. At a bare minimum, the RBC at Jacksonville needs to be replaced, a project that would cost at least \$500,000. Without the assistance of the State’s long term, low interest loan with principal forgiveness, 100% of this cost will be borne by the sewer users. Additional rate hikes will be needed to raise these funds.

In addition to the RBC replacement, other pieces of the WWTFs will also require replacement in the coming years. If the Town waits until a component fails to replace it, the repair costs will need to include pumping and hauling wastewater to Brattleboro at a cost of \$3,344 **per day**. These costs will only increase as time goes on. By securing State SRF financing, these costs can be spread out over 20 years to reduce the impacts to sewer users instead of being immediately due if the Town elects to go on its own with future repairs.

Is this project economical?

The cost increase to sewer users as a result of this bond is a small fraction of the cost of a new on-site leachfield. New leachfields can cost upwards of \$40,000, and many of the properties in each village do not have enough land to locate their own septic system. This proposed project represents the most economical way to ensure that the Villages’ sewage is adequately treated for the next 20 years.

I have more questions about this project. How can I ask them?

If you have questions regarding this project, there will be three informational meetings before Town Meeting Day. The upcoming Selectboard meeting of January 27 will have a presentation by the Town’s engineering firm, Weston & Sampson. This presentation will be recorded and posted online. If you are unable to attend the meetings, but still have questions, contact Gig Zboray at the Selectboard Office at 368-7500 or gig@whitinghamvt.org.