

Wastewater plant an issue in Sparta

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SPARTA — The Township Council will soon have a decision to make on whether to invest in upgrades to the White Deer Plaza wastewater treatment facility or to convert the facility to one that would strictly collect water and send it for treatment elsewhere.

Although most wastewater in the town gets treated at the Sussex County Municipal Utilities Authority plant in Hardyston, wastewater from White Deer Plaza and a portion of the surrounding Town Center is treated directly by the plant itself.

But with the plant approaching the end of its useable life of 30 years, the township is nearing the point where it will have to invest a significant amount of money to bring the plant into compliance with state regulations or else have it decommissioned and converted to a facility that would send the water directly to SCMUA.

Either option will cost money.

To help inform its decision, the council will undertake the study with the aid of a recently approved grant of \$50,000 from the New Jersey Highlands Council, whose 15 appointees are tasked by law with implementing the Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act of 2004. "All costs of the study are being funded by grants," said Township Administrator David Troast.

To conduct the study, the Township Council approved a resolution Monday to retain the services of a team of outside experts from CP Engineers, of Sparta. The firm will assist the township staff in evaluating the costs associated with upgrading the plant or converting it to a facility geared strictly to the collection and conveyance of wastewater.

Stan Puszc, managing partner of CP Engineers, outlined the parameters of the study for township officials at Monday's council meeting.

"The question is: Do you want to continue to operate the plant?" Puszc said. "It

requires a licensed operator. It requires maintenance. It has liability exposure because you are discharging wastewater into the Walkkill River. A deviation from a discharge standard is a violation, which is an enforceable infraction. By getting into the collection and conveyance business only, as opposed to treatment, you eliminate that liability and simplify the process dramatically. You'll still have a licensed collection system operator, but you'll no longer have to deal with the treatment side of the equation."

While the study will initially delve into engineering and technical considerations, any decision by the council will, in the final analysis, come down to dollars and cents.

"A fiscal decision to be made upfront will be whether to invest money into an existing plant, upgrade it for functionality and compliance — or instead, do you invest the money in converting that plant into a collection system and conveyance system only?" Puszc said.

Aside from the White Deer Plaza plant, there are no other wastewater treatment plants in Sparta. The balance of the Town Center not served by the plant is serviced by collection lines and pumping stations that send wastewater directly to the SCMUA plant in Hardyston.

But whether it continues to treat water or instead is used strictly to collect the water and send it elsewhere, the current plant still will retain its ability to handle up to 50,000 gallons per day, Puszc said. And that, he said, "is a valuable proposition for a Town Center because it's a desirable condition for economic development."

As a township resident, Puszc formerly served as vice chairman of the Sparta Planning Board in the late 1990s. Troast said Puszc's knowledge of the town was one of the reasons the township staff recommended his firm for the job.

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RESIDENTS INCENSED BY SERVICE ELECTRIC CHARGES

The Township Council also heard Monday from several residents who were irate at being charged by Service Electric Cablevision for periods during which they were unable to receive service because of extended power outages in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy.

One resident, who was upset at receiving a mere \$13 credit for the nearly 10 days he was without power, said he complained to the company and was told that "it was by the good graciousness of SECTV that they decided to give me this credit, which they weren't obligated to give." The resident called the company's response "the worst customer service I've ever seen."

Deputy Mayor Molly Whilesmith said Monday that members of the Township Council were planning to put their names behind a resolution similar to one recently approved in Andover Township calling for reimbursement for Sandy-related service outages.

Township officials acknowledged that they have little direct leverage over SECTV, whose 10-year franchise agreement with the town has almost seven years remaining.

Councilman Jerry Murphy, for his part, said when the town renewed SECTV's franchise in

Sparta a few years ago, township officials wanted to award no more than a 2-year renewal. But, he said, the state Board of Public Utilities "kowtowed" and determined that any renewal needed to be for a minimum of 10 years.

But Township Attorney Thomas Ryan suggested the town was not entirely without recourse.

"In those negotiations, they did agree to report at least annually to this council and therefore the council is certainly within their rights to call them in to report on issues of service in compliance with the contract," Ryan said.

Members of the Township Council said they would look into doing so in the near future.

HISTORICAL SOCIETY APPEALS FOR HELP

With the Sparta Historical Society close to completing its acquisition of the Van Kirk House, society President Ed Fritsch laid out his vision Monday of operating the house, which is more than 200 years old, as a showcase of local history. He envisions operating it as a museum to which schoolchildren and adults alike would have access.

But pulling it all off, he said, will require additional money for which the society is appealing to the town for additional assistance.

The acquisition of the house, which the society has operated for the past several years under a lease agreement with the

Board of Education, concludes an on-again, off-again dispute with the school board. The board originally acquired both the house and surrounding farm on Route 517 several years ago to serve as a site for the new middle school that was constructed there.

The Board of Education and Historical Society have since worked out an agreement that will see both the house and the few remaining acres of surrounding property transferred to the society in the near future.

"The town has been very kind to us, but there are other fees," Fritsch said, adding that the society's limited funds come mostly from the membership dues it collects. Fritsch said he would like the town to assist in covering the cost of insurance as well as a \$5,000 start-up fund for the coming year.

Township Administrator David Troast said that "because we don't own the property, I'm not sure if we can insure it."

But Troast said if directed by the council, he would see that \$5,000 was set aside in the coming year's budget to assist the society with the anticipated costs of operating the house in the coming year.

Township officials said an additional source of funds for the society could come from outside grants for which the council is considering retaining the services of a grants-writing consultant.