

Frequently Asked Questions: the Town of Old Lyme’s Coastal Wastewater Project

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1. What exactly is happening? I've heard that the town is considering building sewers for the shoreline?

For many years, the Town of Old Lyme has had a policy of Sewer Avoidance; that is, seeking to address wastewater challenges on individual properties without the need for larger scale infrastructure. Recently, however, questions have been raised regarding the long-term suitability of this strategy. A number of independent beach associations within the town also hired consultants to study the existing environmental conditions within their boundaries. The consultants came to the same conclusions that the continued use of onsite systems (septic systems) was no longer adequate to protect the environment and public health, and that the construction of sanitary sewers to an off-site treatment location was the most cost-effective solution. Two of those beach associations have appropriated funds to design and build their solution.

2. Why is the town getting involved? Can't the beach associations solve the problems on their own?

The town, understanding that a fragmented approach to such a solution would be more costly than a unified approach, and could involve substantial additional expenses if wastewater challenges were identified in other parts of town after the beach associations' solution was constructed, elected to conduct its own area-wide wastewater management study.

The Town hired the firm of Woodard and Curran to review the existing information, collect new data, and re-evaluate the options for addressing Old Lyme's long-term wastewater needs.

3. What kind of problems are we dealing with?

Primarily, there are three challenges to adequate wastewater treatment in the study areas. First, many of the areas are composed of filled wetlands, bedrock and other soils in which septic systems don't work well. Since a septic system has to be above the groundwater table to function, low-lying areas are an immediate problem. The second major problem is density of development. In order to properly treat sewage, a septic system needs a certain amount of land area, which varies depending on the soil type. Many of the areas of concern are developed to such high densities that there is no room to site on-site systems. Finally, many of the septic systems in the study areas are far smaller than the minimum required by the Public Health Code, and don't provide adequate treatment of wastewater based on current standards. All of these problems were previously identified in the beach associations' reports, and are well documented.

4. I've heard that the groundwater sampling showed that there was no pollution. Why are we still trying to find a solution?

Per CT-DEEP: What you've heard was incorrect. The water quality sampling definitely showed groundwater contamination related to inadequate septic systems. Levels of ammonia, nitrates, and coliform bacteria were above background levels. The level of contamination clearly showed the impacts of development in soils which were poorly suited for the density of homes that currently exists.

Per CT-DEEP: In addition, given the high density of development and the poor soils conditions, even if the sampling program had not identified a problem, the potential for such a problem is so high that a long-term solution to prevent future problems would still be appropriate.

5. Why can't we get the individual property owners to solve their own problems?

The problem isn't with individual properties, but rather with these 8 sub-areas/neighborhoods having too many houses (and substandard septic systems) in too little space. That's why individual properties haven't been targeted as being "the problem", and why just making a few repairs doesn't constitute a solution.

6. What alternatives have been considered?

The recent studies have considered a wide range of alternatives, such as:

Upgrading and rebuilding individual septic systems. Consider replacement septic systems within the existing soil or, with additional fill, above the existing ground contours. Evaluate alternate septic system technologies.

Creating neighborhood septic systems. Consider extending the pipes from the existing homes to a large central septic tank and leaching field. This would be used for up to 25 or so homes.

Constructing small community treatment plants. Consider small decentralized facilities to treat the flow from communities of 100 homes or less.

Constructing centralized facilities. Consider conventional sewer and treatment facility layouts. In this case, the evaluation considered an in-town treatment and sub-surface disposal system, as well as connection to the New London Regional wastewater treatment plant via the East Lyme sewer system.

7. What was the conclusion of the Woodard and Curran study?

The report, issued in draft form, recommended the construction of a sanitary sewer system to serve the beach communities, with conveyance to an offsite treatment facility. Although costs were similar initially, it was hoped that a local solution, with a treatment facility and discharge into a large underground dispersal system, would be the optimal solution. Although the initial site that was tested yielded positive results, the proximity of the site to existing drinking water wells, and the time needed to either relocate those wells to allow use of the tested site, or perform additional testing at secondary sites, would have negatively impacted the schedule for the unified approach between the Town and the chartered beaches towards solving the collective coastal wastewater management problems in Old Lyme. As a result, the recommendation of the study, which is endorsed by CT-DEEP, is now to convey the wastewater to the New London Regional wastewater treatment plant.

8. Once sewers are built, what's to prevent the expansion of the system and the overdevelopment of the shoreline?

A number of different controls will be put in place to minimize the potential for additional growth or intensification of use. These will include development of an ordinance which defines and controls the sewer service area. Such ordinances and regulations have been adopted in other Connecticut

communities with great success. In addition, if state funds are used to subsidize the project, they will include additional restrictions on expansion of the system.

9. What about seasonal conversions? Won't sewers allow all those seasonal lots to become year-round?

The presence of sewers will remove that control on conversion from seasonal to year round occupancy. However, an adequate wastewater system is only one of several criteria that need to be addressed to allow the conversion, and any property seeking conversion from seasonal to year round will need to meet all those criteria.

10. Has the DEEP reviewed and accepted these recommendations?

The Connecticut DEEP has reviewed all the reports prepared by Woodard and Curran for this project, as well as the reports prepared by other consultants for the beach associations. They have conceptually concurred with the recommendations of the current draft report, and are awaiting the submission of the final version to complete the environmental review process and qualify the project for funding assistance. That assistance is currently set at a grant for 25% of the eligible project costs, and a loan for the balance, at a 2% interest rate for 20 years. The Town has also applied for grant funding through HUD, Community Development Block Grant Program (CDBG), which will help further defray project costs.

11. If there is a consent order issued against the town, will all taxpayers bear the cost and not just the property owners who happen to live south of Route 156?

The town will comply with any consent orders; the developed properties in the affected areas fund the capital projects related to improvement of their property. The town intends to use its borrowing power to fund the project and recoup the costs from the properties over time.

12. How would such an order affect the town's borrowing power, bond rating?

It would not affect the town's borrowing power.

13. Please explain the Town Meeting process: Planned for late October, will absentee ballots be used?

The town meeting will be a discussion and vote on the project costs, including design, bidding and construction phases. There are no absentee ballots for town meetings. The Town's website can provide more details about schedules.

14. There are about 5,168 septic systems in Old Lyme. How many of these will be required to hook up to the proposed sewer system?

At this point, the official count is 1,500 equivalent dwelling units (EDUs), which are planned to be hooked up in the 8 high needs sub-areas, which has been confirmed by DEEP. No other existing dwellings will be affected.

15. There was a mention of building to maximum capacity. Is the town planning to sewer the entire town?

No

16. What entity will own and maintain the pumps, pipes, and infrastructure?

The town will own the collector sewers and pump stations affecting the beaches under WPCA jurisdiction. The Independent beach associations will own their assets. The town will own the pump stations and centralized transmission mains.

17. Will the old septic tanks need to be removed or filled?

The homeowners will be responsible for connecting a small pipe from their homes to the mainline lateral/stub and decommissioning the septic systems.

18. What costs will be included in the benefit assessments paid by properties served by the proposed project?

This will be the infrastructure costs including the engineering, permits, pipes, and installation of other equipment. The total costs of the project minus the state and federal grant funding will determine the net project costs. The benefit assessments will be used to repay the adjusted project costs.

19. What costs will be included in the annual operation and maintenance (user) fees?

The types of items paid for by user fees are mandated by the State of CT. The summary of items is annual operating expenses, permitting fees, and reserve fund for eventual upkeep and maintenance of town sewer equipment.

20. Regarding the Inter Municipal Agreement, do we have one with each town between here and New London?

We are forming an IMA with E. Lyme only to connect to their pipe and transport our sewer material. E. Lyme has agreements with their neighboring towns into New London. We also will have an agreement with New London regarding the capacity required for areas.

21. How will the bonding and assessment be made?

The total costs of the project minus the various levels of funding we have fought to get will be divided by a specific number of equivalent dwelling units (EDUs), which are existing houses and buildable lots.

22. Will the water lines be replaced?

We are working with the State to encourage CT Water Company to coordinate updating really old water mains at the same time to save on road repairs, disruptions and improve water quality. However, these costs would be separate from the sewer project.

23. Can we relocate the pump houses at WSB and Soundview?

Not likely, since the engineering design is preliminary; detailed engineering design will take into account the topology, hydrology, flood, and other technical needs of gravity flow from each house to the lowest point and then pumping to E. Lyme. The locations were also suggested since it is town owned land to keep the costs low. The final locations will be adjusted.

24. Does nobody north of Route 156 pollute Long Island Sound?

The DEEP, after review of the CWF Study conducted by the Town, determined that the 8 sub-areas in the project area, due to density of the dwellings, are collectively polluting LI Sound and adjoining streams and that this situation must be addressed. Three independent beach associations agreed and two took steps to address this. The WPCA also agreed and will take steps in concert with the other beach associations to address this.

25. In the previous WPCA meeting minutes there were references to studying a regional alternative plan. Why did the town study a regional alternative when they knew DEEP favored the connection to New London?

The DEEP supported the review of all alternatives. DEEP encouraged the exploration of options and was involved throughout the study phase to evaluate local and regional options.

26. Will the new WPCAs disband and all the beaches merge with the town's WPCA?

No

27. What is the estimated time line of each beach?

It is not possible to estimate this at this time and be nearly accurate

28. Will Point of Woods need to make any changes or upgrades to its existing sewer system?

The Old Lyme sewer project installation has no impact on Point of Woods.