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Sewers and Septic — a Problem with a History for Halls Road in Old Lyme

BY CATE HEWITT · MAY 21, 2020

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OLD LYME — As the Halls Road Improvements Committee moves ahead with drafting a master plan, wastewater infrastructure will play a key role in determining the density of any planned redevelopment.

Over the last few years, the topic of wastewater treatment has been largely absent from the committee's meetings and presentations to the public, but resurfaced recently during an April 16 Zoom meeting of the committee.

"It's sort of this chicken and egg thing that's going on here all around because we kind of need to know how much density in terms of residential and retail and office space is happening on Halls Road in order to find out how much infrastructure would be required, which would help us with what kind of parking we would need," said committee chair Edie Twining. "One is a real estate thing, one is an engineering and another is a DOT situation," she said.

Twining said she wanted to see a matrix showing how density affects infrastructure, especially

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septic system capacity per number of residential units. She said she did not want to decide on the scale or number of residential units in advance.

"It's more a question of what kind of infrastructure is possible in the area. We need to know what people are able to do. It's all conjecture, it's not something we have a solid handle on. That's why I'm saying [it could be done] as a matrix of possibilities," she said.

Early conversations

The Halls Road Improvements Committee was first convened on Nov. 12, 2015 by then First Selectman Bonnie Reemsnyder. At its fifth meeting on March 3, 2016, the committee discussed a self-contained wastewater treatment system as a potentially beneficial step for Halls Road to be rezoned for mixed-use — a combination of residential and commercial development.

At the committee's next meeting on April 7, 2016, landscape architect Dominic Celtruda from BL Companies, an environmental design firm in Meriden, presented ideas similar to the current committee's vision for redevelopment, including mixed-use, housing, shops, a farmers market, bike lanes, lighting options and community events.

Regarding feasibility of sewer and septic infrastructure, Celtruda said that state regulators were becoming increasingly strict, and he advised the town to consider its current and possible future needs.

"It may be that the town should look at purchasing a parcel 'for the public good.' The infrastructure has to go in first (utility poles, sewers, storm drainage, etc.), so this future visioning needs to be taken into consideration before we spend money on the infrastructure of the streetscape," said Celtruda, according to the April 7, 2016 minutes.

At that meeting, the committee was divided on the advisability of including mixed-use projects in the master plan for Halls Road.

Arguments in favor included incentivizing land owners to develop their properties in keeping with the town's vision, supporting multimodal transportation and community connections, and providing residential rentals and/or condominiums for young people and seniors who want to reside in Old Lyme.

Arguments against mixed-use included a lack of demand for more residential, commercial and/or retail space, spoiling Halls Road with a "wall of buildings," and the need for a water supply and sewers or a wastewater disposal system.

At the May 5, 2016 meeting, the committee agreed to include mixed-use development and potential wastewater management in the master planning process.

On July 15, 2016, the committee discussed various technologies for wastewater treatment and acknowledged the geological challenges of Halls Road, which could require a sewer treatment facility in Old Lyme.

At the August 26, 2016 meeting, Weston and Sampson, an engineering firm, presented wastewater system options that included expanding existing septic systems, creating a community septic system, or building an onsite "package" treatment plant. The firm cautioned that "DEEP will consider a wastewater treatment plant, but will shy away from a community

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septic system with new discharge.”

Wastewater treatment was not mentioned in the committee’s minutes again until December 6, 2018 when about 70 people attended a Yale University Design Workshop presentation of potential schemes for Halls Road that showed three-story mixed-used buildings close to the street.

During the public feedback session, “stresses on parking and septic were brought up” and the committee responded that these factors “will need to be taken into account through design and regulation.”

Reached by phone on May 20, Bud Canady, who has been a member of the committee since it began, said Halls Road would need more wastewater capacity to expand, whether by septic for smaller projects or a sewage system for a very large expansion.

“Currently it would be virtually impossible to put another restaurant in this area because there’s just not enough sewage capacity or septic capacity, so there’s definitely a need if we expand anymore. But, it’s a matter of whether someone’s going to develop enough there to expand to need sewage... so it’s cart before the horse, unless someone comes up with some reason to do some major developing in the area I think sewage would come after everything else,” he said. “Even if a master plan could come up with mixed-use, but it’s all private land so some developer would have to come in and buy up the private land and then start something, so it’s not as if the town committee or the Town of Old Lyme could do anything.”

Low-density sprawl

Sewers can often — but not always — provide greater density than septic systems, particularly for residential uses, said Sam Gold, executive director of RiverCOG, on May 19.

“It’s not impossible to do it on septic, but it’s difficult,” he said about developing Halls Road as a commercial corridor with apartments. “It can be done without sewers, it’s possible ... still, if the soils aren’t cooperative, it’s difficult. The more you have to engineer, the more expensive it becomes.”

The Post and Main apartments at Old Saybrook Station were built with septic systems because the soils on the site were “amazing” and could process the quantity of wastewater, said Gold.

But that project was an exception, he said. “For Old Lyme, you would have to build your own treatment facility or you pump it to New London, which is probably the most feasible option.”

Sewers are expensive, Gold said, but a failing septic system can have far-reaching consequences.

“In a public sewer situation capital costs are carried by the ratepayers, but with septic all up-front costs are borne by the developer and the responsibility for operations are on the developer or the owner,” he said. “The big problem with septic systems is are they being maintained? When they fail, isn’t just that person’s property, it’s Long Island Sound, it’s their neighbors’ property, it’s the water quality of neighboring wells.”

Septics can also create “low-density, single-story sprawl,” which is the development pattern along Route 1 in Connecticut, Gold said.

"When you use septic and wells, you need land and that forces you to spread out and that means that businesses must be low density because they can't dispose of wastewater," he said.

"That is the struggle along the shoreline. You want to create mixed-use environments that have amenities available without a car, but that requires density... and density creates wastewater disposal issues."

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