

West Windsor Purchases Resort Sewer System

On Wednesday, February 12, the West Windsor Selectboard closed on the purchase of the Ascutney Mountain Resort sewer system. Voters approved the purchase of the system almost two years ago on March 6, 2012 but a lengthy foreclosure proceeding prevented the transfer from taking place. Late last fall, the legal impediments were finally resolved.

The town paid \$500,000 for the sewer system with a 2%, 20-year loan through the Vermont Clean Water State Revolving Fund (CWSRF). The debt service on the loan will come from sewer fees paid by the users of the system. Immediately following the purchase, West Windsor transferred to Windsor the portion of the system located within Windsor's boundaries, which consists of a pump station and approximately 4 miles of force main. The Windsor Public Works Department will be maintaining the system in both towns.

A "special assessment district," approved by West Windsor voters on October 27, 2012, was formed automatically with the town's acquisition of the system. With the special assessment district established, the town has the same tools available for the collection of sewer fees that it has for the collection of property taxes, including the ability to sell properties with delinquent fees.

The transparency that comes with municipal ownership should provide sewer users with a level of comfort about the operation and financing of the system that they have not had in the past. In addition, on February 3rd, the West Windsor Selectboard adopted a Sewer Use Ordinance, which provides for a Sewer Advisory Committee with representatives from each of the four major user groups at the resort. The advisory committee affords users unprecedented input into the administration of the system. In addition to regularly reviewing the system's financial and operational performance, the committee will negotiate contracts and provide sewer budgets, user rates and capital improvement plans for the Selectboard's approval.

Ownership and control of the system also provides the town of West Windsor with a means of addressing the wastewater issues that have recently surfaced in the village of Brownsville, where aging, failing and flood-damaged systems are all too common. Given the small lot sizes in the village, most well protection areas encompass neighboring on-site septic systems, a situation likely to result in well contamination sooner or later. Elevated levels of E coli have already been detected in Mill Brook, which runs through the village. This situation not only presents significant health concerns, but also precludes additional residential or commercial development. With the ski area closed and a moratorium on development in the village, prospects for improving the local economy are limited.

In addition, since the ski area closed, many resort property owners are choosing to rent out their homes year-round. The conversion of seasonal homes to full-time residences has resulted in a 12% annual increase in school enrollment over the past two years. If enrollment continues to increase by 12% per year, the school will exceed its wastewater capacity in three to four years, a prospect which adds even more urgency to the town's waste water concerns.

Last month, the town applied for a Community Development Block Grant for disaster recovery from the Vermont Community Development Program. The town is also pursuing a Pollution Abatement Grant from the Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation. If awarded, the grants will help fund the construction of a sewer collection system in the village, connected to the existing resort sewer system. Replacing substandard on-site systems, many of which are located in the floodplain, with a state-of-the-art municipal collection system will eliminate threats to drinking and surface waters; alleviate concerns about the growth of the school population; allow for development in the village; and improve prospects for economic recovery.