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On April 9th, Westport voters will have the opportunity to authorize borrowing for the first phase of the Rt. 6 water and sewer project. If funding is approved at the ballot and then at Town Meeting in May, the project will import clean drinking water from and export sewage to Fall River. In the future, as the project's phase's progress, it will provide North Westport's neighborhoods with clean drinking water and remove significant amounts of nitrogen contaminants from flowing into portions of the Westport River's east branch, allowing the river to achieve its full environmental, recreational and economic potential.

Adequate sewer systems play important roles in sanitation and disease prevention. Wastewater can contaminate the local environment and drinking water supply, thereby increasing the risk of disease transmission. To improve health, it is vital to develop a system to manage community wastewater and sewage.

The neighborhoods next to Rt. 6 have a history of well contamination from septic system discharges and industrial spills that polluted the groundwater. Neighborhoods with small lots that have septic systems and wells close to each other are particularly vulnerable to nitrogen contamination, making the water unsafe for infants, pregnant women and the elderly to drink. In the areas planned to receive clean water, hundreds of wells have been contaminated.

In addition, a new drinking water health threat has emerged from a family of chemicals known by the acronym PFAS. PFAS was incorporated into scores of different products used daily in our homes and businesses. PFAS contamination increases the risk of cancer and impairs immune and hormone systems. Recent testing by the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) detected unsafe levels of PFAS in businesses along Rt. 6 and in multiple homes in North Westport.

Nitrogen contamination of the river poses a different threat. Excess nitrogen acts as a fertilizer promoting algae blooms that block sunlight essential to maintain eelgrass beds, and absorb the oxygen necessary for all marine life. Eelgrass provides a nursery, food source, and refuge for multiple marine species, serving a crucial role in the town's aquaculture and fishing economy. The death of hundreds of acres of eelgrass over the preceding decades is largely due to nitrogen pollution from septic systems. It's the reason why the river is out of compliance with state and federal water quality standards.

The portions of the river in the vicinity of Rt. 6 have the highest nitrogen concentrations. As the sewer phases of the project are completed, those nitrogen loads will be pumped out of the watershed to be treated and removed, and the clean effluent discharged in Fall River. The more nitrogen is totally removed from our watershed by sewer the less likely DEP will return to mandate individual septic system upgrades in order to achieve river water quality standards.

The Board recently extended the cesspool phase-out date to 2028 in anticipation of a positive vote for the sewer. As design and construction progresses, the Board will continue to coordinate its regulations in order to avoid conflicts between the mutual objectives of these joint public health and environmental restoration initiatives.

Communities are often confronted with public health and environmental problems that individuals are hard pressed to know what they can do to make a positive difference. In this case there is straightforward answer, vote to support the Rt. 6 sewer project.