

## Commentary: Why Westport needs Route 6 project



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Posted Tuesday, March 12, 2024 9:41 am

**By James Whitin**

Westport citizens will have the opportunity to vote for clean water at that ballot box on Tuesday, April 9.

There will be a ballot question to allow for a debt exclusion of approximately \$35,000,000 (not an override) for the installation of the first three phases of the sewer and water trunk lines along the Route 6 corridor from the Fall River line to almost to the Dartmouth town line. This will be followed by the same question at our Annual Town Meeting in May.

We are actively searching for grant funds to reduce the amount we will actually pay.

So, why should we vote for this?

Westport traditionally has relied on individual wells and individual waste water treatment. The latter consist of a mix of old cesspools, pre-Title V septic systems, Title V septic systems, and A/I Nitrogen reducing Title V systems, depending on when they were installed.

Westport's lot configurations over the years have allowed small lots to be developed through all areas of town, from small clusters of former seasonal cottages on ponds and along the edge of the east and west branches of the Westport River to the greater Route 6 corridor.

The problem with clusters of small lots is that there is not enough distance between wells and waste treatment facilities. This results in bacterial and nitrogen cross contamination between waste systems and drinking water wells. This concentration of development also increases the bacterial and nitrogen pollution concentrating in the groundwater, which eventually enters the Westport River. We also estimate that there are more than 200 contaminated wells in town, probably more as these are only the ones that have been tested and we are aware of.

Over the years water and sewer infrastructure has been recommended in the town's master plans, has been suggested in the MEP (Mass Estuary Program report), has been suggested in the town's TMDL (Total Maximum Daily Load) report on nitrogen pollution, and has been recommended in the Targeted Integrated Water Resource Management Plan (2020).

This water and sewer plan has been in development for about three-plus years now. Originally it began in the planning office and with the town administrators office, and was handed over to the newly created Infrastructure Oversight Committee. The town has received ARPA funds directly, through Bristol County and through the Commonwealth (thanks to an earmark from Senator Rodrigues) that has been used and is still being used to design this

phased trunkline along Route 6.

So why do we need this trunkline? It is the backbone of the future system bringing clean water to our neighborhoods from North Wattupa Reservoir on the border of Fall River and Westport, and directing our wastewater to Fall River's treatment plant. This is the first step in being able to provide clean and safe drinking water and clean waste disposal services to the neighborhoods in the greater Route 6 area.

It will increase property values. It will increase economic development for our local businesses, which will increase our non-residential tax base. It will allow existing homeowners to add on without expanding their septic systems. It will alleviate the need to upgrade cesspools to expensive Title V systems. It will allow development of starter housing so our children and grandchildren can afford to begin a life in Westport.

Yes, it will cost money. An effort is being made to make the betterments for residential use an extremely modest \$8,000 to \$10,000 price point. To do this, the cost will be shared with rest of the town. Why should we do this? The whole town will benefit in numerous ways. Once implemented, less nitrogen and less bacteria will end up in the groundwater, our aquifer, the Westport River, and South Watuppa Pond (phosphates for the pond).

Also there is the issue of Mass DEP's regulations regarding nitrogen pollution of estuaries. Given that DEP's regulations on the Cape have imposed a requirement of universal septic system denitrification upgrades in all communities that do not enter into a 20-year Water Management Plan that endeavors to reduce their nitrogen impact to be in compliance with the Clean Water Act, it is not unreasonable to expect that its deferral for South Coast communities will not be permanent.

The cost of upgrading everyone's system to a Title V denitrification system would be born individually and would cost much much more. Plus there would be no benefit of clean water for our neighborhoods.

This is just a sketch of what will be before you in April and May. Others will hopefully answer more of your questions including a more precise figure of how much this may add to your tax bill.

Do I want to pay more taxes? No. But I will for this step to preserving our drinking water, our ponds and our rivers. I'll be happy to share the burden. It's the right thing to do. (I wish I could tie into this system). VOTE YES FOR CLEAN WATER!

Should you vote for this? I will vote yes.

*Whitin is the chairman of the Westport Planning Board.*

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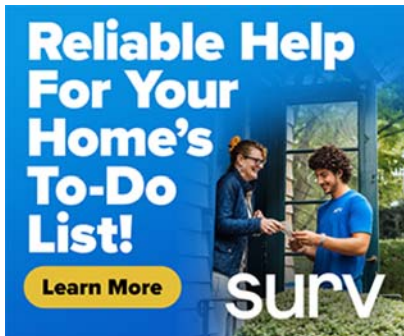
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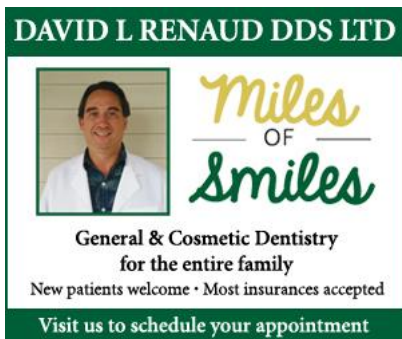
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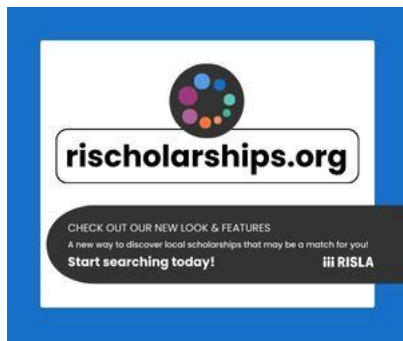


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