

**Town of Westport
Infrastructure Oversight Committee
Meeting Minutes – January 24, 2024
6:00 pm**

The in-person meeting of the Infrastructure Oversight Committee (IOC) was called to order at 6:05 pm in the auditorium of the Middle/High School. The location was special given the anticipated large turnout, which proved to materialize. Attending were Steve Ouellette (Chair), Bob Daylor (Vice Chair), Maury May (Clerk), Jerry Coutinho (At Large), Manny Soares (Planning Board), Joe Amaral (At Large) and Joe Rioux (At Large). Also attending were Jim Hartnett (ex-officio Town Administrator) and Roger Fernandes (Consultant), as well as Dave Peterson and Alex Silveri of Kleinfelder (Engineers). A quorum was achieved with seven sworn-in members in attendance. The meeting was well attended by over 100 members of the public.

Organizational business:

- **Membership – update.** All seven members are appointed/sworn in. Lawrence Holsworth (FinCom) has resigned; FinCom has nominated Christopher Thrasher to replace him.
- **Minutes – approval.** The minutes of our last meeting on November 29, 2023 were moved by Maury May, seconded by Robert Daylor and approved 7-0.
- **Next meeting – scheduled.** The next meeting was not scheduled. It will be schedule via email. [Eventually scheduled for February 21, 2024.]

Statement from Sen. Michael Rodrigues – delivered by Maureen Flannigan, District Aide.

The Senator could not be here tonight due to a prior commitment but wants Westport to know that our Route 6 water & sewer trunkline project is his #1 infrastructure priority in his District, which can unlock substantial economic development in the area. To this end he procured \$1 million in ARPA funds to design, engineer and permit this project. The project will provide an anchor for smart commercial growth, increasing economic development, and housing stock. It will help all of Westport by increasing its tax base, which we all know has been a pressing issue for years. With this project we can attract new enterprises to our Town, which will lead to greater returns in the future.

Presentation – Route 6 Water & Sewer Project. The Infrastructure Oversight Committee has prepared a PowerPoint slide presentation to provide information on the planned water & sewer trunkline project for Route 6 from Fall River to the Dartmouth line. Slides were presented by members of the Committee.

- **Introductory slides.** Mr. Ouellette greeted those attending the meeting and introduced members of the Committee and our Town administrator as well as our engineers and consultant to the project. He then spoke about the three main reasons for the project that are (1) economic development and expansion of the tax base, (2) environmental improvement relating to reduced bacteria and nitrogen loading of the Westport River, and (3) health benefits from cleaner drinking water.
- **Funding slides.** Mr. May noted the complexity of funding for the project from both grant and loan sources. The reality of funding is difficult. He noted two rejections from MassWorks, an unsupported federal earmark from Sens. Markey & Warren, a tight schedule hindering Bristol Co. ARPA funds, ineligibility for U.S. Agriculture Department grants, and rejection of a low-cost State Revolving Fund loan. On the bright side, our Rep. Keating has supported a \$960,000 earmark through committee hearings; unfortunately the money is not “in the bank”

given the current budget mess on Capitol Hill. Bottom line: we may be forced to the higher-cost municipal bond market for funding.

- **Project slides.** Mr. Daylor discussed the project. The project envisions water & sewer trunklines from the Fall River line (at Whites) to the Dartmouth line. It is divided into three contracts based upon pumping stations: Contract #1 – a sewer line paralleling the existing water line from Whites to Meatworks/Route 88; Contract #2 – a waterline extension from Greenwood Terrace to Bread & Cheese Brook, and sewer from Meatworks to Bread & Cheese Brook; and Contract #3 – both water & sewer from Bread & Cheese Brook to the Dartmouth line. It is designed to ultimately serve residential neighborhoods on both sides of Route 6. The cost is estimated at \$31.5 million, broken into three contracts of \$8.5 million, \$15 million, and \$8 million. The scheduling is for three consecutive years (2024, 2025 & 2026) to begin work on the three contracts, and three consecutive years (2025, 2026 & 2027) to complete construction. We note that the Select Board, Planning Board, and this Committee have been working on zoning changes that would make it easier for businesses to build and connect.
- **Related Grant Applications in the Works.** Mr. Soares noted that the State has committed to this project. We have a shovel-ready project now. We are seeking a PFAS grant to install water pipe to the Macomber School to correct the water pollution there. We should try to get the trunkline built with one contract. We are currently designing the Macomber loop and are optimistic we can get a grant. We should ask the Town to financially support the whole contract to get this trunkline built as soon as possible. Denitrification systems do nothing for PFAS contamination---only sewer can help. We are going to ask for the full cost of the project but will still work on grants to lower the cost. We need to show to the State and federal government we are serious.
- **Betterments.** Mr. Daylor described betterments as a piece of the funding puzzle. Two components that we must pay: (1) the **bond cost** amortized over 20-30 years paid off by debt exclusion by the entire Town; and (2) **betterments** that is paid by those who benefit from new water & sewer. They are paid over the life of the bond over 20-30 years. With our consultants we are studying what other Towns have done. Every home will pay a fixed rate, which has not been fixed yet. Commercial property betterments are computed pro rata based upon the size of the property and their expansion capabilities.
- **Pros & Cons of Financing Three Contracts Upfront.** Mr. Soares is in favor of financing all three contracts of the project at once. We can bid all three contracts together or separately, but with the cost of construction materials rising, it would be cheaper to bid all three upfront. Mr. Soares also supports using the PFAS grant and other monies to go into neighborhoods between Route 6 and Macomber School. The cons are that the larger amount would be harder to sell at the Ballot Box and Annual Town Meeting but Mr. Soares believes that if costs are known the voters will go for it. If the bigger number does not pass Town Meeting, we have fall back: we can try to fund Contract #1, or we can wait another year. Whatever happens, the design is finished, the State is committed and the project will go forward.

Motions - the Infrastructure Oversight Committee will then vote on the following motions as recommendations for the Select Board to consider and vote on.

- **Motion #1 – Town Ballot.** Recommend that the Select Board place on the April 2024 Town ballot a vote to approve a Debt Exclusion for a loan from either the public municipal bond market or the State Revolving Fund of up to \$8.5 million for the construction of Contract #1. The motion was moved by Mr. May and seconded by Mr. Daylor.

- **Motion #2 – Town Meeting.** Recommend that the Select Board place on the May 2024 Annual Town Meeting Warrant an Article to approve a Debt Exclusion for a loan from either the public municipal bond market or the State Revolving Fund of up to \$8.5 million for the construction of Contract #1. The motion was moved by Mr. May and seconded by Mr. Daylor.

At this point, our Chair Steve Ouellette opened the meeting for discussion of the motions by Committee members and those in attendance. The latter provided all the comments.

- **Shana Shufelt (Select Board).** She supports the project and appreciates the work we have done. Talk more about the contracts separately, such as the value of first contract. Uncertainty about the money we need. She asks about the economic development of water & sewer. Mr. May made reference to a 2018 SRPEDD report that indicates \$400,000 additional annual tax dollars from Contract #1. He also discusses the redevelopment of the old transportation building, the two Costa shopping centers, and the old motel, as well as expansion of Meatworks--if sewer is built.
- **Rob Machedo.** The State is going to put in a new Route 6 – asks when? Mr. Hartnett says discussion is in early stages and no timeline has been set and it may take five years. We blame cesspools and septic systems but what about stormwater? His concern is if the State repaves Route 6, we cannot put in sewer for seven years. He thinks the State would approve the entire project not in sections. That is not working. Put in for \$35 million and try to get the whole thing done. Let the people here tonight make the decision with a show of hands. Mr. Ouellette says the votes tonight will be taken by the committee. Mr. Soares says we can amend the motions to \$35 million.
- **Paul LaRue.** He says he has experience with rising costs --- and it's not 30%, it is 300%! Recommends going for all three contracts. Tiverton has had a difficult time, with six general managers in eight years. His warning: do not try to soft sell the Betterment tax --- put some numbers on the words.
- **Jim Whitin (Planning Board).** He has been involved with this project since the beginning. Supports doing this all at once. Doing it year by year by year would be too painful. Doing it all at once would also show the State that we are serious.
- **Dave Simcoe.** Do we have a water and sewer department? Mr. Ouellette says it is currently the Select Board. He asks about a rainwater tax? Mr. Hartnett says we will be responsible for just the water bills from Fall River. Do we mark up the water rates? Mr. Hartnett says we pay a premium over the Fall River rates. Will entire Town pay for the project? Mr. Daylor says that whatever we cannot get from State aid we will pay through debt exclusion. He says Betterment Fee will be charged when sewer main is in front of your house.
- **Korin Petersen (Buzzards Bay Coalition).** We have been monitoring water quality in the Westport River for more than 30 years and believe that sewer is the best way to deal with pollution. Sewer brings economic development with environmental protection. SRF inflated by \$1.2 billion with Infrastructure law. Town needs to reapply for SRF loan to get it good rates.
- **Tony Vieira.** He speaks in favor of the project. We have a big opportunity to help develop Route 6 and he cites Meatworks as an example. If we have the design, let's do it! He says that getting authorization to borrow \$35 million does not mean we will borrow all of it. Recommends different approach to trying to get federal money and we need to send a delegation down to

Washington DC. Water & sewer will increase the value of the properties in Town. This is a no brainer!

- **Michael P. Sullivan.** He remembers working with students from UMass years ago, and he remembers water & sewer was one of the big economic development interests. He understands the SRF rejection, and recommends going after other money.
- **Betty Slade.** It's very difficult to get people on board and she would like to support the \$8.5 million contract, which is the original thought. Mr. May responds that we thought the \$8.5 million would more easily pass with the people. However, in the past couple of weeks we have been getting an alternate opinion from many people, including our State Senator, to go for the full amount to fund the entire project. Mr. Daylor adds that we were timid.
- **David Cole.** He asks will the Committee vote on motions to recommend the \$35 million tonight, and will those here tonight be able to express their opinion with a show of hands? Mr. Ouellette says yes to both questions. If the amount is up to \$35 million, it could be lower, correct? Mr. Ouellette says yes. And if interest rates go down, we could take advantage of lower rates. Again, yes. Mr. May wants to add that he believes we are on a learning curve and will get at applying for grants in the future.
- **Tony Vieira.** He reiterates that if we get authorization for up to \$35 million we are not likely to borrow all of it. He also says we should go back to our federal Senators and try again in 2024. Elections are coming up and they should take that into consideration. As a community we can do this.
- **Tanja Ryden.** There needs to be a well developed outreach plan to build community support. She especially suggests more meetings in the immediate district to be served.

Following the conclusion of public input on the motion, Chair Ouellette took an informal vote of those in attendance who favored proceeding with a ballot box and Town Meeting request for up to \$8.5 million for just Contract #1, or up to \$35 million for the entire Route 6 project. The show of hands for the \$8.5 million was scattered but it was overwhelming for the \$35 million. Upon unanimous agreement of the Committee, Motion #1 was re-written and presented as follows, along with an updated Motion #2:

- **Motion #1 – Town Ballot.** Recommend that the Select Board place on the April 2024 Town ballot a vote to approve a Debt Exclusion for a loan from either the public municipal bond market or the State Revolving Fund of up to \$35 million for the construction of the entire project.

The motion was moved by Mr. May and seconded by Mr. Daylor, and passed unanimously.

- **Motion #2 – Town Meeting.** Recommend that the Select Board place on the May 2024 Annual Town Meeting Warrant an Article to approve a Debt Exclusion for a loan from either the public municipal bond market or the State Revolving Fund of up to \$35 million for the construction of the entire project.

The motion was moved by Mr. May and seconded by Mr. Coutinho, and passed unanimously.

Mr. Ouellette then moved on to Motion #3:

- **Motion #3 – Betterment Policy.** Recommend that the Select Board determine a Betterment Policy for the “bettered properties” for the entire Route 6 project. The motion was moved by Mr. May and seconded by Mr. Coutinho.

Public input ensued.

- **Shana Shufelt (Select Board).** She says she is confused by the motion. Mr. Fernandes says Town Meeting will vote on betterments. Mr. Harnett says the Select Board will be looking to the Committee for a recommendation.
- **Jim Whitin (Planning Board).** Also confused what we are motioning here. Mr. Harnett says we are working on betterments now with the Committee. We have to authorize either Town Meeting or the Sewer Commission, as is legally required. You should discuss this at your future meetings but need to keep it moving.
- **Rob Machado.** Point of clarifications – there will be betterment . Mr. May – flat rate for residential and formula for commercial customers. He says we need more discussion on expansion into the neighborhoods. How long did it take to get two applications denials. Mr. Fernandes says MassWorks and SRF took about six months to get rejected.
- **Tanja Ryden (Board of Health).** Is it the intention for the Select Board to remain Water & Sewer Commissioners, or establish a DPW? Mr. Ouellette says a DPW is a tough sell and Select Board will stay Commissioners for the moment.

With discussion ending, the Committee took a vote on Motion #3, which was approved unanimously.

Adjournment. Mr. Amaral moved to adjourn the meeting and Mr. Daylor seconded the motion. It passed unanimously and the meeting was adjourned at 7:55 pm.

Prepared by Maury May, Clerk