

Water, growth at center of sewer fight

By: **RILEY YATES** (Sun, Apr/22/2007)

While critics argue a deal to expand public sewers in Plumstead will encourage development, backers believe the alternative could be even worse.

The proposed legal agreement would allow Bucks County Water and Sewer Authority to provide sewer service in the central third of the township. By contrast, the authority has argued it is entitled to provide sewer service to all of Plumstead, a majority of supervisors say.

"This actually would very tightly control where Bucks County Water and Sewer Authority can go and where they can't go," Supervisor Vince Formica said.

The negotiations are designed to settle a 2005 lawsuit in which the authority claimed Plumstead's decision to allow three developments with their own sewer plants violated a 30-year agreement for the township to stay out of the sewage business.

The proposed settlement has been denounced by some residents and two of five board members. They say it will open the door for development and harm Plumstead's fragile water supply, since sewage would be pumped out of Plumstead instead of treated locally and allowed to return into the ground.

The Plumstead Environmental Advisory Council has also come out against the pact, asking the township to study how expanded sewers would affect a community whose rock formations already make it difficult to retain groundwater.

Under settlement negotiations, Bucks County Water and Sewer Authority would be made the exclusive public sewer provider for an area that includes the stretch between Routes 611 and 413.

The three developments with their own sewer plants — one of which has already been built — would be able to hook into county sewers. Other future housing developments that are already on the township's books might also join the authority's system.

Opponents say the deal would more than double the number of approved public sewer hook ups in the township, a move they charge could pull away valuable water.

In a written statement, the environmental council said an agreement with the sewer authority "sends an obvious and disturbing message to residents that their elected officials and township representatives are not interested in protecting groundwater resources, and the quality of life and ecosystems it supports."

"All of us are begging: 'Just let us crunch the numbers,' " said Dianne Mill, the council's chairman.

Plumstead sits in part on diabase, a fine-textured rock that is not conducive to building up groundwater.

According to estimates by Supervisors Housley Carr and Betsy Helsel, the expanded sewer system would result in about 65 million gallons of water a year being pumped out of the township.

The pair want Plumstead to promote onsite sewage treatment methods such as sand mounds and spray irrigation.

"We cannot afford to 'mine' our groundwater and pipe it away," they said in a statement. "Doing so would deplete our aquifer, force many township residents and businesses to drill new wells and threaten our future water supply."

Formica and Supervisor Stacey Mulholland said discussions are under way to limit the number of hookups the sewer authority could offer in the area it serves, in an effort to address concerns about future development.

"It would be very limited," said Formica.

Mulholland said allowing onsite treatment plants, which have since been eliminated as an option in Plumstead, have done little to hamper development anyway.

Of the three developments approved with onsite plants, Timberly Farms resulted in 60 homes off Meetinghouse Road; Carriage Hill, at Gordon Road, is proposed at 463 units; and Plumstead Chase, off Twin Silo Road and Point Pleasant Pike, calls for 40.

"How has that hindered development if we have 500 units coming our way?" she asked.

Anti-sprawl activists have long charged that the expansion of public sewers threatens communities' ability to limit growth.

"Sewage plants plus overdevelopment result in water depletion and stream pollution," Bill Ballantine of the Tinicum-based Eco-Bucks told Plumstead during its most recent supervisors meeting.

Not so, says the Bucks County Water and Sewer Authority.

Development decisions are made by landowners and local overseers, not county sewer officials, said Patrick Cleary, the authority's spokesman.

"We do not control what houses go where," he said. "We're merely a provider."

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