

Bond to cost \$3.9 million for sewer fix

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By
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WHITINGHAM- Selectboard members warned a \$3.915 million sewer bond at their regular meeting Wednesday evening, following a presentation by representatives of Weston & Sampson, a regional engineering firm with offices in Waterbury.

The nearly \$4-million cost of the project may be shocking to Whitingham residents, and even more so to the sewer rate payers who will repay the bond through their biannual fees. The good news is that the overall local cost could be slashed by about 50% if the town can convince residents of the town's two sewer districts to participate in a confidential income survey.

Mike Smith, of Weston & Sampson, said the town could be eligible for subsidies and forgivable loans in excess of 40% of the total cost through the state's revolving loan fund and a pollution control grant. The grants and forgiveness are available to towns or districts in which residents' average income is under the state's median income. Whitingham, as a whole, is "a hair" over the income threshold, Smith told board members, but the state will also base the aid on the income of just the residents of the Whitingham and Jacksonville sewer districts.

The town has partnered with RCAP to produce the income survey. RCAP is a

Massachusetts-based nonprofit that provides an array of community services, including needs assessment surveys. Mark Johnson, of RCAP, says RCAP and the town have already reached out to residents by mail and in person to urge them to complete the survey. Johnson notes that, due to COVID-19 restrictions, RCAP has not been able to participate in door-to-door interviews. But town officials said last night that they've gone door-to-door to urge residents to fill out their surveys.

Despite the efforts of both RCAP and the town however, more participation is needed for valid survey results that the state will accept. At Wednesday evening's meeting, town officials said at least 29 more responses are needed within the next four weeks. At least 75% of the town's residents must respond for the survey to be considered valid. Town officials stressed that individual income information is kept confidential and protected by RCAP, and never seen by anyone in the town or town government.

The survey can be mailed in, processed over the phone, and accessed online at <https://tinyurl.com/surveywhitingham>. But residents also need a unique survey ID to fill out the form. District residents who have misplaced or never received the information, including their ID, can contact RCAP. "I'd encourage anyone living in the service area who needs their survey IDs, either because it was lost or they never received one, to contact RCAP Solutions at (802) 505-1037 or mjohnson@rcapsolutions.org," said Johnson. "We can also mail out another survey if necessary or interview household representatives over the phone, if preferred."

Sewer rate payers currently pay \$550 per ERU (equivalent residential unit) every six months, or a total of \$1,100 every year. According to Weston & Sampson's calculations, without the median income-based grants and forgiveness, the sewer district's annual bond payment would be about \$232,000 per year, increasing sewer bills to \$903 per ERU every six months, or \$1,806 per year. With the median income-based construction subsidy, the bond repayment would drop to \$154,000 per year, and bills would increase to \$744 or \$1,488 per year. With the additional pollution control grant, also median income-based, Smith said sewer bills would increase by only about \$61, to \$611 every six months, or \$1,222 annually. "I can't stress enough how important it is to get those (income) surveys completed,"

The project to upgrade the sewer system was mandated by state regulators, after an evaluation of the plants following a system breakdown revealed that the aging system was in need of upgrades to meet current regulations. The project will essentially gut the current sewer plants in Jacksonville and Whitingham, replacing the current equipment, which engineers said has already outlived its life expectancy by 20 years, as well as upgrading and expanding the buildings. The project also includes infrastructure repairs, including sealing

leaking manholes.

“Several manholes were noted to be leaking allowing rain water to get into the collection system,” Smith said. “As a result, with clean water going into the sewer system, plants are chugging away, processing clean water.”

Smith said processing the runoff was also adding to the plants’ operational costs.

According to Shane Mullen, of Weston & Sampson, following its review of the initial design, the Vermont Agency of Natural Resources sought to require redundant systems, essentially doubling the price of the project.

Mullen said the firm challenged ANR’s demands, in an effort to keep Whitingham’s costs as low as possible.

“We didn’t agree with that approach, based on our previous experience,” Mullen said. “Our position was that redundant systems would not serve the town well on multiple fronts. It would double the burden, require building expansions to house the redundant treatment equipment, and costs would double from what we previously anticipated, so we pushed back on that.” After a month of negotiations with ANR and other regulators, Weston & Sampson convinced the state to sign off on a plan for one system, with a supply of spare parts in stock for speedy repairs.

“If there’s a breakdown, all that needs to happen is to call a repair person to come up and replace the part,” Mullen said. “So there’s limited down time and all work can occur while maintaining the town’s permit requirements.”

Whitingham voters will weigh in on the bond by Australian ballot on Town Meeting day. Voters can either vote by mail or in person on Tuesday, March 2. Although the town takes on the bond debt, rate payers will repay the loan.