



ENVIRONMENTAL LOOKOUT: SEVEN REASONS TO VOTE YES ON TREATMENT PLANT

By Mary Adams Oleksak, Mashpee Clean Waters

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Mashpee Environmental Coalition is pleased to present a guest column by Mary Adams Oleksak, organizer of Mashpee Clean Waters, an informal grassroots movement founded to drive attention to water quality issues in Mashpee.

A New Wastewater Treatment Plant for Mashpee

7 Reasons to Vote Yes at the May 2021 Town Meeting

The future of our environment and our economy is on the warrant for the May Town Meeting. Mashpee voters will be asked to approve a wastewater sewer and treatment system that addresses critical nitrogen pollution of our waters. This article needs a 2/3 vote to pass. Here are seven reasons that this warrant makes sense:

1. Mashpee's waters are among the most impaired on Cape Cod

As Mashpee's growth skyrocketed over the past fifty years, we have continued to use septic systems that release high levels of nitrogen into our waters. Once in our waters, this overabundance of nitrogen has fueled the growth of algae that has choked out native eelgrass and shellfish, critical to our waters' natural cleaning. The end result is waters that are close to being "dead," unable to support marine life. Nitrification of the waters is a problem across Cape Cod but, Mashpee is especially hard hit.

2. Water quality issues can decrease property values and economic activity

As the waters continue to degrade, residents and visitors can see (and sometimes smell) the large floating beds of macroalgae. The water gets murkier, and the bottom turns to sludge. Attention to this problem diminishes the reputation of our area and makes it less attractive to visitors. Research in other areas of the Cape showed a direct correlation between water quality and home prices. The continued growth of our home values is not inevitable, and homes could decline in value if we fail to act.

3. This plant treats wastewater that is causing some of the worst pollution

The proposed plant helps reverse this trend and helps restore our precious water. The plant will be located next to the Mashpee Transfer Station. It will actually be the twelfth wastewater treatment plant in Mashpee. Except for a small plant at the high school, developers installed them in exchange for permission to develop sites such as Mashpee Commons, Willowbend, and parts of New Seabury.

The plant uses advanced technologies that clean the wastewater within a closed system with the sludge taken off-site. It will be as invisible to the neighbors as the current highly efficient site that has been active for years at Mashpee Commons.

4. There is no alternative solution

This problem has been studied for more than 30 years. The Town has over two decades of concrete annual data that shows the growing problem. The solutions must be multi-disciplinary. We have to track runoff and decrease our use of fertilizers. We can also use shellfish. Quahogs and oysters are extremely efficient filterers of the waters. Mashpee was the first town in the U.S. to gain approval by the EPA to use shellfish to remediate nitrogen pollution. But **none of these efforts will be sufficient**—we have no choice but to also sewer key parts of our town.

5. Failure to act means near-certain legal action that will limit the Town's options

The Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection, as well as the Towns of Mashpee and Barnstable, have already received notice of intent to file a lawsuit from the Conservation Law Foundation related to the continued use of septic systems that do not remove excess nitrogen. If a suit moves forward, the Town could lose access to the low-cost State financing and other potential funding sources. CLF is the group that successfully sued to clean up Boston Harbor. They know what they are doing, and we need to take them seriously.

6. Acting now means we are eligible for favorable financing

The entire cost of the plant and first phase collection system is expected to come in around \$54 million. Luckily, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts has set up a special fund that will provide zero percent financing for this type of project. The Town has made a preliminary application that is subject to Town Meeting approval. We can't get this favorable financing unless we obtain the approval of two-thirds of Town Meeting attendees in May.

7. This investment will require no new taxes!

It is expected that the full cost of the debt repayment will be covered from the Mashpee Wastewater Infrastructure Investment Fund set up just last year and from the new rental tax. Approval of this debt at Town Meeting will not add to property tax bills!

The Way Forward

The easiest and smartest way forward for our Town is to approve this new plant in May. Not moving forward will increase the cost to all of us and put our home values, economy, and environment at risk.

As the May Town Meeting will be held both indoors and outdoors to help minimize safety concerns, we encourage all citizens to attend and vote “yes” on this critical matter.

Mary Adams Oleksak is the lead organizer of Mashpee Clean Waters, and a member of the Mashpee Environmental Coalition. Want more information? Join the Mashpee Clean Waters Group on Facebook or visit www.mashpeecleanwaters.info.