

Water Resources Advisory Committee
Minutes of Meeting
July 22, 2009
Town Hall Room 126

Members present: Barry Rosen, Ron Beck (chair), Carol Holley (clerk)
Guest: Clint Seward

The meeting opened at 7:26 p.m. Mr. Rosen noted that the email shell for WRAC needed updating. Mr. Rosen moved to accept the minutes of the prior meeting as corrected, Mr. Beck seconded and all voted in favor.

Members present discussed the start time of meetings as currently posted, and agreed that it should be changed to 7:00 p.m. so that, hopefully, the meetings would end by 9:00 p.m. Mr. Beck asked Ms Holley to communicate with IT to adjust the email shell, and to include Clint Seward and Matt Liebman as cc recipients. Ms Holley agreed to email Mark Hald with that request.

Mr. Beck brought up the topic of the brochure, noting that it was a fine document originally drafted by the EPA that the WRAC made some needed changes to so that it would fit for Acton. The question was whether it should be mailed to everybody in town or given to realtors to distribute. Mr. Seward preferred the mailing, noting how few people understand how septic systems work or how to maintain them. Mr. Rosen thought it could be printed and given to realtors, put in the library and other public buildings, and posted on the town website as a pdf file. Mr. Seward thought it could be inserted in with the tax bills.

The topic shifted to management districts and what that involved. Mr. Rosen noted that “experts” don’t agree on how septic systems operate. Pumping can depend on a whole lot of things. Garbage grinders make a big difference. He noted that people moving into a new home can stress the system initially because of all the washing that occurs with a move; then they think the system has failed when it probably hasn’t. He noted that there could be issues with record-keeping because pumpers don’t always file their paperwork with the Health Dept. Mr. Rosen recommended that the pumpers draw paperwork from the Health Dept. before they pump any system. Ms Holley noted that she found one pump record that had to be filed on line; that data could be directly sucked into a database.

Mr. Rosen thought that the problem became more complex as you got into it. The WRAC’s goal is to try to do the best we can for the Town of Acton – what do the residents of the town really need? Mr. Seward asked, who is supposed to follow up? Messrs Beck and Rosen replied, the Health Dept. Mr. Beck observed that he had lived in Acton for 5 years before he found out he was supposed to pump every two years – why don’t we start out enforcing the regulations we have? At some level, it’s up to the homeowner, who could produce a receipt. The regulation doesn’t say what happens if you don’t pump. Mr. Halley had noted that it’s in the interest of the pumping contractors to send out reminders but at some level the town really has no idea what is happening.

Mr. Beck observed that the WRAC needs to develop some kind of a procedure. Ms Knibbe thinks we are coming back in a year with some concept. Originally, the EPA came up with the idea 10-15 years ago that all major urban areas should be sewerred – but what about the rest of the country? Mr. Rosen noted that is where decentralized treatment comes in, which is where Acton was going. He related that

people have discovered that centralized sewers can lead to problems with recharge – stream beds were drying up.

Mr. Rosen brought up the Utah management district document. There are varying levels of management districts. They can have taxing power, and can manage any number of houses. They could be regionalized based on affinity group – lots having similar needs; we don't want to mix affinity groups because their needs are different.

Mr. Beck noted that you get to the point where it's politically impossible to do. Mr. Rosen noted that the system needs to meet the needs of the affinity group. People will do it if it saves them money and works well. There's the idea of group rates. Mr. Beck noted that places in the northeast where there are higher levels of management are usually under an EPA order to fix something. That is where the level 4-5 models of management in the Utah document have come in – usually there are real soil problems or the area abuts a water body. The other big black hole is that nobody tells a citizen what the wastewater alternatives are.

Mr. Rosen related that a new federal law is taking effect as of January 1, 2010 – something like the Groundwater Act. The federal government is more concerned about viruses in the water supply; the law will require all water entities to test for coliform, then fecal coliform if coliform is present, then if that level is high there is a probability of viruses. Acton's wells are already monitored for raw water (before treatment).

Mr. Beck asked, do we want certain areas to have a menu of treatment options? Mr. Rosen replied, if you are in a Zone II (clerk note: AWD definition) there is a better chance of getting into a well, although septic systems do a great job because it's an aerobic processing that kills bugs – aerobes are what kill the bad bugs.

Mr. Beck observed that some management district approaches have implemented design rules for septic systems. One of the biggest challenges we have got – if you build a system with inspection ports, you can see what is going on. In troubled areas, somebody should be able to inspect on demand – do you have to dig up everybody's lawns? It's just not practical. For a management district you can require certain information for a pumper to provide information, too. All you know about the pumpers know is that they are licensed.

At a previous meeting, Ms Probst had brought up considering one of the needs areas as a pilot, and would like to know lot-by-lot information. Do we generate a detailed questionnaire? We could cross-reference with Health Dept. files. Mr. Beck noted that, if you go back to the CWRMP, there are needs areas defined – 15 of them. Five of these areas could be management districts – Indian Village, Brucewood Estates, Flagg Hill, EAV, with S/T/F as a possible addition. There are five areas where it would be a second choice. There are three options for each needs area in the CWRMP.

Mr. Rosen asked, what do the Selectmen want? Implementation or a plan? Mr. Beck thought they were looking for a proposal – Mr. Rosen asked what that meant. Mr. Beck noted factors – groundwater level, proximity to water body. Mr. Beck thought that there were four ways to approach the issue, the first being that the WRAC comes up with the concept that will work for the five priority areas. Then pick one area for a pilot. This might not be the best approach because you spend a lot of time and energy to solve one area and nothing happens to the rest. Or we could come up with a strategy for the five areas that might fit the other 13 as well.

Mr. Rosen was concerned that the committee, and the town, would run out of energy before the project was completed. He was concerned that the issue would be left alone until the town is in reactive mode, and then scare tactics start, and people make bad decisions. The bigger the project, the harder to get buy-in – politics get tougher. It could also get beyond the local areas of expertise, and we might need technical help.

Mr. Seward felt one management district was needed for all of Acton. A management district with 15 needs areas. Mr. Rosen felt you had to characterize groups with similar sites.

It was agreed that WRAC members needed to collect information on management districts in place elsewhere. Issues to be considered included: definition of district – whole town?; pumping schedule; enforcement; design record/inspection record rules; inspections; technologies; monitoring for effectiveness.

What the district would be is a topic that needs to be explored. Public input meetings need to be held to get a sense of the town.

All agreed that pumping is a major component of management. Other concerns include:

- Enforcement methods – what powers are required
- Keeping better records of designs and implementing rules regarding inspection reports
- Inspection program
- Technologies – IA systems – develop menus for certain areas
- Monitoring – groundwater wells
- Record keeping and reporting
- Who funds what? What needs to be funded? Outside sources of funding available? Is there an SRF-type fund for advanced treatment?

A preliminary topic prioritization led to:

1. Pump schedule and enforcement (1a. inventory)
2. Design plan rules (Ms Holley thought these were in place)
3. Inspections
4. Funding
5. Technologies
6. Monitoring

These are the topics to be discussed over the next few months in some detail. The next meeting's topic will be pump schedules and enforcement.

Mr. Beck asked, what do we do about education? There were dueling charges of misinformation coming out of the S/T/F debates. Mr. Rosen noted that a lot of information gets expressed as sound bites; people get overloaded. Mr. Seward felt that the town web site was a good place to educate. Mr. Beck thought some education should be done within the November time frame. Mr. Rosen thought it would be nice to know what people would be for or against regarding management districts. People who can help write it so it doesn't seem confrontational.

Ms Holley brought up that a joint WRAC/DRB meeting to explore Low Impact Development had been scheduled with Steve Roy for Sept. 23. Mr. Beck asked that the discussion be limited to a 25 minute presentation and a 20 minute Q&A. Ms Holley will communicate with Mr. Roy regarding this.

It was a decided that a workshop should be scheduled for the November meeting at the Public Safety Building, at 7 p.m.

It was noted that the group has to research how management districts are doing in other areas.

At 9:40 p.m., Mr. Rosen moved to adjourn, Ms Holley and Mr. Beck seconded, and all voted in favor. Meeting adjourned.

Respectfully submitted,
Carol Holley
Clerk