

Commentary by Adrian Bowles

I have been a Westport resident for 13 of the last 15 years. I left the area briefly when I sold the business I founded here to a firm in Cambridge MA, and returned when it was time to start again because I wanted to raise my family here. I have created lasting jobs in the community, and I am deeply concerned about the future of this town. I am here tonight to voice support for the Y in their effort to build at Mahackeno.

To put my comments in context, let me note that I am a computer scientist by education, and a management consultant focused on risk management and regulatory compliance issues by profession.

My doctoral research was supported by grants from the US Air Force and Navy, which were interested in my team's work on complex fault tolerant information systems, specifically techniques to identify and control risks of cascading failures. In the 1980s, I was the lead consultant to RCA's design team for the Air/Land Battle Management System, a distributed information system intended to operate under the most hostile scenarios imaginable. The consequences of failure in all these systems includes the loss of life, territory, and conceivably the loss of a war, so it is safe to say that

I take risk management seriously. I believe that it is time to look at the Y's application before the Conservation Commission as a risk management problem to be solved, rather than avoided.

As an observer at the Commission's most recent meetings, I have been struck by the tactics used to scare undecided residents about the safety of the Mahackeno project, and to influence the commission to reject the application. The good news is that we have a Commission to evaluate proposals on their merits rather than an individual whose job it is to reject *all* such applications. That indicates to me that the citizens of Westport understand there are acceptable risks, and the Conservation Commission should strive to *mitigate* some of them, and to grant permission when it is reasonable to assume that an applicant can *manage* the remaining risks. It is not necessary to eliminate all risks, or we would start by eliminating cars, alcohol, tobacco, and trans-fats from every public and private space in the town.

I don't want to trivialize the environmental impact of this project. I do want to point out that in engineering terms, it is not on the order of Hoover Dam in scope or the personal computer in complexity. It is well within our abilities to build and manage a safe facility at Mahackeno. I'll address only the biggest issues in my remarks here.

In the hearings, much has been made of the probability of failure of a septic system, and in fact we have been virtually assured by the opposition that it will fail and the consequences will be dire. Engineers understand that materials fail: that is inevitable. They also understand that products, which depend on materials, will fail. As a product, a septic system will of course have failures. However, engineers go beyond the reliability of individual components to consider the systems in context - the larger systems, if you will - and there is every reason to believe that the system under consideration at Mahackeno can be adequately managed and maintained. At the last meeting we heard evidence that the oft-cited failure rate and the consequences for the FAST system have been overstated, perhaps intentionally so.

In fact, there are more than 10,000 FAST systems in locations around the world, including the fragile environment of Antarctica. Whether a particular system is in or out of compliance at any given time may appear to be black and white, but the nature of compliance issues and their consequences include a lot of gray areas. For comparison, I can tell you that virtually every international bank that has an office in Westport - the ones that hold the personal assets of most of this audience - is technically out of compliance with

one or more rules at some point almost every week. The reason we don't keep our money in our mattresses is because we rightfully believe that the banks have adequate procedures to rectify the variances. In a word, they have earned our trust.

The Conservation Commission can and should impose reasonable constraints on any applicant, but in the absence of compelling evidence that the applicant is predisposed to ignore those constraints, the permit should be granted. At the very least, an applicant whose 84-year history suggests a genuine desire and ability to be a good environmental neighbor should be given the benefit of the doubt. For example, we don't need to know in advance which operator will service a system that has yet to be approved. If state certification criteria for operators have been established, no application should be denied based on the fact that one has not yet been selected. Deferring that decision is a prudent business choice - many more options may become available between the time of the application and the implementation.

In an effort to focus on constructive dialogue, I will close with this request: let us discuss the risk management issues rationally, then think like systems engineers and get this facility built together.

Adrian J. Bowles
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