

To the Editor:

Facts About the Family Y at Mahackeno

For more than a year, a small but vocal minority of opponents to plans for a new Westport Weston Family Y at Mahackeno have raised a variety of concerns in their attempts – so far unsuccessful – to block approval of the permit applications. No concern has generated more discussion than that related to plans for the handling of wastewater discharge. Opponents have cited purported “failures” of the FAST System in three Connecticut installations, ignoring installations throughout the United States which operate without incident – including the system at the Valley Shore YMCA in Westbrook Connecticut. As well, they ignore the fact that the FAST System is far superior to the conventional septic systems in use throughout this area. Another issue raised by the opposition relates to stormwater – both the amount and the quality – and the potential impact on the surrounding bodies of water and neighboring properties.

As a member of the Family Y Board of Directors and Building Committee, and as a regular attendee to the Town meetings and the various public hearings, I am familiar with the testimony by and documentation from the consultants to this project – including hydrogeologists as well as sanitary and civil engineers, and the hearings conducted by the Connecticut Department of Environmental protection – including testimony from that department’s sanitary engineer. I have had the repeated opportunity to be exposed to the presentation of straightforward facts that do not support the opinions expressed by the opponents.

Facts about the FAST System: A typical septic system consists of a holding tank and leaching fields. Effluent is held in the tank and metered out to the leaching fields where it percolates into the ground and is renovated solely by passage through the ground and by bacteria in the soil. This is the case without regard to proximity of the system to bodies of water.

In the system proposed for the Mahackeno site, effluent flows from the source to two holding tanks below ground which have a capacity of 34,000 gallons. From those tanks the effluent flows to a pump chamber and is pumped to the FAST System south of Poplar Plains Brook where it is treated for BOD (a measure of the relative oxygen-depletion effect of a waste contaminant) and nitrogen before it is distributed among six leaching beds located more than 400 feet from the river and Lees Pond, where it percolates into the soil and is further renovated.

The Connecticut DEP requires not less than 21 days travel time from the leaching beds to the river, after which time the effluent, having been previously treated, is deemed to be fully renovated. Because soils at the Mahackeno site are particularly suitable, the treated effluent will move only 65 feet – of the 400-foot distance to the river – in 21 days so that the travel time to the river for the Family system exceeds 65 days, after which time it is said to be renovated to “drinking water standards.”

There is no direct wastewater discharge from the system to the river and in any case, whatever finds its way to the river will have been fully renovated and in compliance with all DEP requirements. Further, this is one of the factors considered by the Conservation Commission when six of the seven commissioners voted to approve the Family Y permit which includes use of the FAST System.

Facts about Stormwater Runoff: The design of the project at Mahackeno included an analysis to compare the peak discharge in Poplar Plains Brook as it enters Lees Pond under existing conditions and the peak discharge under proposed conditions. Calculations by renowned engineers and specialty consultants show the 25-year discharge in Poplar Plains Brook at its confluence with the Saugatuck

River (Lees Pond) to be about 606 cubic feet per second (cfs) and the 25-year discharge under proposed conditions to be about 608 cfs (a difference of 0.3%). Thus, the project does not result in increased flooding or erosion in Poplar Plains Brook, in the Saugatuck River or on the adjoining properties.

Regarding stormwater quality, this project includes a system of six underground infiltration areas plus one bioretention area (rain garden). These infiltration areas and the rain garden are designed to capture and hold the runoff from the first inch of rainfall – the so-called water quality volume – from the proposed driveway, parking areas and building roof. More than 80% of annual runoff occurs during storms producing less than one inch of runoff, so the infiltration areas will capture more than 80% of annual runoff and, therefore, more than 80% of any potential stormwater contamination.

The plans and calculations related to the stormwater drainage system – including collection, treatment and discharge – have been reviewed and approved by: the Westport Engineering Department; Stearns & Wheler – a civil and sanitary engineering firm hired as the consultant by the Westport Conservation Commission; the Westport Flood & Erosion Control Board; the Westport Conservation Commission.

If this information seems technical, it is ... and I don't pretend to understand all of the science behind it. But what I do know is this:

- The FAST System has been in use for nearly 40 years. It was first developed for marine (water) applications. It is approved by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the United States Coast Guard. It has met standards established by the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection and has been approved for Family Y use by the Westport Flood & Erosion Control Board and the Westport Conservation Commission.
- Plans for stormwater drainage and treatment at Mahackeno have been developed to a standard that Stearns & Wheler, consultant to the Conservation Commission, characterized as “state of the art” and noted as a “...stormwater treatment system [which] meets the Best Management Practices established by the State and exceeds conditions that exist most elsewhere in the town of Westport.”

Suggesting that any discharge from the Family Y facility will contaminate the waters around Mahackeno is disingenuous, at best. The planned facility is sited close to the bottom of the 84 square mile Saugatuck River watershed. The current eutrophic (high mineral and organic nutrient content and low oxygen content) condition of Lees Pond is the result of a number of factors including, but not limited to, residential septic systems, use of lawn fertilizers and animal waste. The proposed systems for the handling of sewage and stormwater at the Mahackeno facility have been designed specifically to avoid further negative impact on this environment.

Those who oppose the plans for a new Westport Weston Family Y at Mahackeno – for whatever reason – are entitled to their opinion. The information provided in this letter is fact.

Sincerely,

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