

**TOWN OF CHARLESTOWN
WASTEWATER MANAGEMENT COMMISSION
4540 South County Trail
Charlestown, RI 02813**

**Minutes of Special Meeting
Friday, March 7, 2014**

1. **CALL TO ORDER:** Meeting called to order at 6:00 pm.

2. **ROLL CALL:**

Present: Commissioners Tom Ferrio, Robert Frost, Barbara Lutzel, Beth Richardson,
Wastewater Manager Matt Dowling. Absent: Commission Chair Pete Ogle.

3. **DISCUSSION:**

a. **Discussion and potential action relating to draft correspondence from the Chair of the Wastewater Management Commission to the Rhode Island Coastal Resources Management Council (CRMC) and/or the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management (RIDEM) regarding *Phragmites* and its role in nutrient uptake in critical groundwater nitrate areas.**

Mr. Ferrio stated that this topic is also on the Town Council agenda for Monday evening, therefore, this commission should consider getting any message from this meeting to the Town Council by then. The WWMC received a letter in advance regarding the above topic.

Mr. Ferrio began by saying that there has been discussion in part of the Quonochontoug area for some years now regarding doing some maintenance on one of the freshwater ponds in Quonochontaug called West Pond, the largest freshwater pond in this area. This pond is located between the public drinking water wells for the two water systems in the area and the coast. It seems to Mr. Ferrio that previous discussions have revolved around the wisdom of spraying chemical product (such as roundup) on a pond very close to drinking water wells.

Ms. Richardson asked why people want to get rid of the phragmites. Mr. Ferrio stated that he has done some research about the topic and that phragmites is considered to be an invasive species and has invaded the circumference of the pond. Mr. Prior stated that the phragmites growth has killed the cattails in the pond. Approximately half of the pond area is being considered for treatment which includes mixed growth, a mix of both phragmites and native plants such as cattails. The northwest marshy area is filled with phragmites and a mix of native plants. There are houses all around the pond, and a couple of these homes have pond frontage. Much of the land surrounding the pond is owned by the Fire District.

George Prior introduced himself as one of the advocates for this and stated that he is one of the landowners with frontage on the pond.

Discussion ensued regarding the wisdom of spraying glyphosate on these plants and what it may do to the drinking water. DOH has looked at this in detail and has determined that spraying would not pose a threat to the water supply, that it has been successfully used around the country, and that this is standard treatment for this invasive species. This potential action is being brought forward by the neighborhood association in order to restore the natural habitat, to stop the encroachment into the pond, and to restore the habitat to what it once was.

Mr. Ferrio continued the discussion, stating that in his research he has learned that there are several varieties of phragmites and in many areas of the United States, including New England, there is a variety that grows very slowly and does not take over areas, the variety tends to coexist with existing plants. There are also some invasive varieties which can grow very rapidly, growing through the soil by sending out roots and having the potential to grow 60 feet in distance per year, which means that they can very quickly take over an area, choking out the native plants. It is Mr. Ferrio's understanding that these phragmites are of the invasive variety. Mr. Ferrio stated that he wanted to point out that everything they are talking about has nothing to do with their roles or interests as members of the Wastewater Management Commission, stating that this commission is not in charge of invasive species or deciding whether or not to spray things. The issue that this commission is concerned with is what happens to the vegetation when it is sprayed and subsequently dies.

Mr. Ferrio stated that he cannot find enough information to determine whether it's convincing in one way or controversial in another but there is some argument that when this vegetation dies, it is known that the plant material, both roots and above ground, holds a big storage of nitrogen. The vegetation above ground (or above water) will be harvested and disposed of through burning or composting. The underground portion will just die and decompose. To continue with the background, in order to be successful in this, it requires a number of years of treatment. Some species are much more resistant to the chemicals than others. It appears that the chemical works pretty well on this but you won't get 100 percent coverage the first time. The species can also reestablish pretty rapidly, too, especially with open space for new seeds to take root.

In terms of why we are here, there was a schedule for a CRMC hearing regarding this next Tuesday and the WWMC wanted to meet to consider the issue prior to the hearing. In the meantime, the CRMC hearing has been postponed until April 8, 2014. This additional time gives the commission the opportunity to consider this at the next regular meeting or at a subsequent special meeting. Mr. Ferrio suggested that perhaps they have rushed this because of the time constraints, and that perhaps there has not been enough time for the public to comment on this. The commission can decide to defer to a future meeting or to make a decision tonight.

What the correspondence from the WWMC would address would be the concern about the death of these phragmites causing an increase in nitrates in the well water in the water district wells. With the nitrate levels already fairly high, (7 ppm in recent data) and with 10 ppm being the limit for public wells before EPA action is required, there is some concern that going and wiping out the phragmites is going to lead to an increase in the nitrogen levels in the wells which could make this water undrinkable.

Mr. Dowling stated that the radius of influence of the public water system does incorporate some of the wetlands associated with West Pond. Mr. Ferrio presented a chart (USGS Report 2010) which shows the groundwater flow to the north, and going out onto West Beach Road. This chart shows that the area of influence includes the large marshy area to the northwest of the pond.

George Prior spoke and stated that he thinks that what you will find on the survey report is that the groundwater moves from the north to the south, and that the pond water, or surface water, moves out toward Quonochontaug pond. However, when the water is high enough, it moves out toward Quonochontaug pond northward. The source of the water for these wells is coming from the north. The contention is that under extreme pumping conditions, water from that pond may find its way to the wells.

Ms. Richardson confirmed that the proposal to get rid of the phragmites in West Pond was issued by the Central Beach Fire District and that they own all the land in the area to be treated. Some abutters may get some of this spray on their property but they are still willing to have the spraying done, according to

Mr. Prior. Ms. Richardson asked if the Central Beach Fire District is committed to the eradication of the phragmites. Mr. Prior stated that yes they are, and that the plan is to hire a company to perform the treatment over at least a three year period. As a requirement of obtaining a CRMC permit, planting of root stock, or native species, following the eradication of the phragmites is to be done. Theoretically, native plants will take over the invasive plants over time.

Ms. Richardson stated that it seems to her, if they do not have to rush through a decision, they shouldn't. She thinks they should have a discussion with people who want to be heard. Mr. Dowling suggested that someone from the WWMC go to the Town Council meeting and indicate that either they would like to put this on the agenda for another meeting or allow the commission to move forward with the way they see it. Mr. Ferrio believes that he would like to have the discussion and hear from the public tonight and then table this discussion to a special meeting to take place when the WWMC chairman returns, giving at least a week of notice and perhaps organizing some additional information.

Mr. Prior would like to know what the Wastewater Management Commission wants the Town Council to do. Mr. Ferrio stated that he was surprised to see this on the Town Council agenda. The words on the council agenda read "Discussion and potential action regarding supporting a letter from the Wastewater Management Commission to CRMC pertaining to the spraying of phragmites in West Pond and groundwater nitrate levels in Quonochontaug".

The Town Council would have a potential vote to support (or not) the letter from the WWMC. Mr. Prior stated that it seems like an unnecessary step to try to convince the Town Council that it's ok to do this. He further stated that there is a hearing with CRMC coming up and that they are preparing to have scientific people there whom they have to pay and it seems like an unnecessary step to try to convince the Town Council of this. Mr. Prior doesn't understand why the Town Council has to be involved as CRMC will be the body with the last word on this.

Motion made by Mr. Ferrio to table this issue to another special meeting to be held the week of March 17, 2014. **VOTE:** Mr. Ferrio – aye, Mr. Frost –aye, Ms. Lutzel – aye, Ms. Richardson – aye. Motion passed with four (4) concurring votes.

Motion made by Mr. Ferrio to request the wastewater management administrator to send a note to the Town Council explaining that the commission has not completed their deliberation on this and they are requesting that they not consider this at the monthly meeting. **VOTE:** Mr. Ferrio – aye, Mr. Frost –aye, Ms. Lutzel – aye, Ms. Richardson – aye. Motion passed with four (4) concurring votes.

4. PUBLIC COMMENTS:

Mr. Peter Goodwin introduced himself as the president of the Quonochontaug/East Beach Water Association and stated that he was here as a representative of that association. He wanted to reiterate some of the things that he discussed at the WWMC meeting two weeks ago concerning high levels of nitrate in everyone's wells, especially along the shoreline. His association's concern is that an additional surge of nitrogen, through the spraying of the phragmites and the subsequent decomposition of the decaying plant matter underwater could render their water useless, if the nitrogen surge was to penetrate into the wells.

Mr. Frost, being a commission member and also a homeowner in the neighborhood in question, asked if this would be a conflict of interest for him. Mr. Dowling will ask Mr. Brochu about this.

5. ADJOURNMENT: Motion to adjourn made by Ms. Richardson. All in favor. Meeting adjourned at 7:00pm.