

The following letter by William Moowmaw, was published in The Berkshire Eagle on Tues., Nov. 30, 2004

The author is a chemist with a PhD from MIT. He taught chemistry and conducted research at Williams College for 26 years. He has used ion exchange technology in the lab and in his home. He is currently a professor at Tufts University, where he is thd s senior director of Tufts Institute of the Environment. A Williamstown resident, Moomaw served on the town's planning board in the 1980s.

Lessons from the past for Williamstown water line

To The Editor:

The debate over whether to build a large water line to address water problems and provide support for new development along Cold Spring Road sounds familiar. History is repeating itself. At the 1977 Town meeting, the Selectmen, acting on the recommendation of the same engineering consultant that the Town employs today, unanimously recommended a very large gravity sewer line all the way to Mt. Greylock High School. At that time, the on-site sewage treatment systems of both the High School and Sweetwood Nursing Home were polluting local streams.

Several of us stood up and asked if any alternatives had been considered, and were told no, the "right solution" was a large 2-mile long sewer line. Town Meeting had to be continued to a second night when it was agreed to develop a set of alternatives before proceeding.

It took two years with the full engagement of everyone to develop the small, pressure sewer that relieved the pollution, yet prevented large amounts of additional development along Williamstown's most scenic corridor. In the process, the Town qualified for an additional \$1 million for its innovative approach. The tacit agreement was that the small sewer solved current problems, but that future development would have to meet the conditions of the land for on-site water and sewer within the 2.5-acre rural residence requirement. Except for expansion at Sweetwood, this has worked to keep the corridor free of large-scale development.

The new proposal for a water line is much the same as before. There is a water problem at the high school. Sweetwood would like to develop real estate in Williamstown as a cash cow to support the North Adams Hospital. Finally, a permit has been granted by the Zoning Board of Appeals to build an industrial facility - a money making art conservation lab affiliated with a "not for profit" organization.

Our pipe loving engineering consultant is proposing a big 16-inch water pipe that could supply hundreds of houses. The extra waste must drain into a 2.5-inch sewer line that may eventually need to be upgraded at taxpayer expense. Our Selectmen are all for it, and the Town has been kept in the dark about alternatives and the true costs.

The lesson from the sewer line debate of 27 years ago is that information is critical to getting an effective solution that meets the interests and needs of all parties. In a town where knowledge is a key industry, and traditions of protecting open space are strong, we need a transparent and full discussion of the choices before us. With so much at stake, let us take the time to do this well.

There are inexpensive and low cost solutions to the high school water problem that can be implemented immediately. There are much more suitable sites in town for an art conservation facility that already have adequate water, sewer and street access. Finally, I would hope that Sweetwood and North Adams hospital would reconsider their plans to sprinkle additional housing units along Cold Spring Road, and instead find a location in town that would allow people ready access to Spring Street and to events that make Williamstown such a delightful place to live. Let us not make the mistake of other towns that discover too late that building water lines, sewers and roads leads to sprawl and ever higher taxes.

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