

Hopkinton and Webster Don't Like Co-op's SSR Recycling Plans

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Recycling is often a feel-good issue. But town officials in Hopkinton and Webster are not feeling so good about a proposal from the cooperative that handles their trash and that of 25 other municipalities [including Andover] to build an \$11 million recycling plant.

The cooperative is considering building a facility with "single-stream" technology, which means recyclables would be sorted on a conveyor belt instead of at homes or by towns.

Selectmen from the two towns have sent a letter to director Jim Presher saying they have not been given enough information about the project and that the facility will circumvent their successful town programs, which bring in revenue and have taken years to develop.

The cooperative's board is scheduled to vote Tuesday [May 20] on whether to move forward with the plan, buy land for it in Concord or Franklin, and contract with towns outside the cooperative who may want to use it.

Dissent from Hopkinton and Webster may not mean much. The votes are weighted according to population. The cooperative's three cities, Concord, Franklin, and Laconia, have expressed support for the plan.

The proposal was prompted in part by the fact that the cooperative's contract with the Wheelabrator incinerator ends next year. Fees are expected to increase from \$43 per ton of trash to between \$55 and \$65 per ton.

Experts say single-stream recycling adds convenience for users who don't have to separate plastic and paper and drives up recycling rates. More recycling means less trash sent to the incinerator, and money saved.

Stephen Clough is assistant public works director in Hopkinton and the town's representative on the cooperative board. Hopkinton and Webster share a transfer station and a recycling rate of about 15.1 percent of all waste produced, calculated by tonnage. [Andover's recycling rate was about 26% for 2007.] The towns shared \$61,000 in revenue last year and saved \$41,000 in tipping fees and transportation costs. [Andover earned \$21,985 by selling recycled material and avoided \$22,289 in tipping fees and trucking costs by not sending that material to Penacook. That's a total of \$44,274 that didn't have to be raised through local taxes last year.]

Clough said the facility might help some towns increase rates. "It might also crush us," he said in an interview.

The facility would be paid for out of the cooperative's reserve funds. Clough said that means all cooperative

members, including towns that choose not to send their recyclables there, will be liable if the project fails. He would rather see a new organization created to pay for and run the facility.

Clough also said the projected jump in tipping fees is inaccurate. The cooperative has used reserve money to keep the fees "artificially low" in recent years so the change would seem

more dramatic, he said.

"I call it a mischaracterization," he said. "And I think I'm being pretty polite."

Clough said he would rather see reserve money go toward stabilizing tipping fees and setting a schedule so that towns can know what to expect from year to year.

In a response letter, Presher said
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Successful recycling programs that have taken years to build up and are worried that the single-stream program could undermine them. They are also worried about the finances.

[According to Mark Stetson, "the financial projection for Andover is approximately a breakeven within the first year, and a positive thereafter. For me, the biggest selling point is saving our tax dollars. In an ideal world, every resident would separate and recycle everything, making SSR unnecessary. But we don't live in an ideal world, so it makes sense to do whatever we can do to make recycling easier in order to increase participation and thereby save tax dollars."]

The project would be paid for out of cooperative reserve funds. That money would be paid back by the recycling revenue.

Webster Selectman Tom Mullins

wanted to see a mechanism ensuring that, if the project fails, his town would get back the money that it contributed.

"The intent is to keep you whole," Musselman said.

Mullins was wary. "I've said before, I don't debate that," he said. "I just would like to know how you will do that."

Presher told Mullins it will be one of the first things discussed when the staff comes back to the board with details about the governance of the recycling center.

Musselman said people in the recycling business feel confident about its viability, largely because of demand from China.

He told the board members that the cooperative will need to have a sense of whether their towns will use the facility this year, even if they are going to have to wait until next year's town meeting to have curbside pickup or changes at their transfer stations approved.

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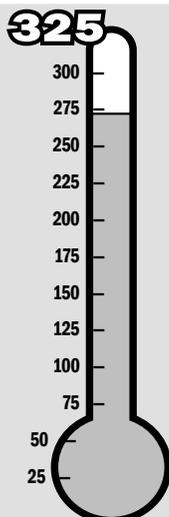
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