

Thoughts on the Benefits and Costs of Working with the School District to Pursue a Connection with the Town of Hartford's Sewer system

Jeff Lubell

Feb. 15, 2021

In general, I suggest we approach this question through a benefit-cost framework. Under this approach, we'd first sketch out the potential benefits and costs along with open questions, then do research to answer the questions and consider options for mitigating risks, and then finally, with these answers in hand, do a revised benefit-cost analysis to determine whether the benefits outweigh the costs.

We will also want to get wide public input to better understand residents' views and concerns.

Here are a few thoughts to inform this initial brainstorming of benefits and costs:

Defining the scope of the inquiry

There are two main ways to frame the inquiry, which in my view have very different benefits and costs:

1. Should Norwich partner with the Dresden School District to pursue a joint connection to the Town of Hartford's Sewer System?
2. Should Norwich, on its own, pursue a connection to the Town of Hartford's Sewer System?

In my notes below, I will address both of these questions, but the first one is so much more time-sensitive and with a stronger benefit-cost profile that I would urge us to really focus on this one first.

Benefits

Should it be successful, a joint project of the Dresden School District and town of Norwich to connect to Hartford's Sewer System could lead to a number of potential benefits:

- Resolution of Marion Cross's wastewater issues
- Meeting the wastewater needs of businesses along Route 5 South and in the Norwich village center
- Meeting the wastewater needs of households in and around the village center, including households with older, failing systems.
- The ability to meet the wastewater needs of potential affordable housing / mixed-income developments between the Hartford town line and the Norwich village center.
- A sewer system could also facilitate the addition of a modest number of residential units in Norwich that could help to increase the diversity of Norwich's housing stock, though the number of additional units is limited by the relatively short distance of the system and natural limitations, including wetlands.

To clarify the scope of the benefits, more information is needed. In particular, it would be helpful to know:

1. What is the scope of the wastewater needs of businesses along Route 5 South and in the Norwich village center? The school district may already have some of the information. We could get additional information by talking with other businesses.
2. What is the scope of the wastewater needs of households in and around the village center? I'd suggest we conduct a simple survey to find out which of these households might be interested in connecting to a sewer system, if such a connection were available.
3. What are the prospects for developing affordable housing between the Hartford town line and the Norwich village center? Since this is one of the more important potential benefits in my view, it will be important to gain greater clarity on this. One way to do this would be to talk with the Dresden School System to see if they would be open to allowing the development of an affordable housing or mixed use project between the Dresden Fields and I-91. We could also interview affordable housing developers or even issue a public request for information.

If there were a viable affordable housing project that could be served by the sewer connection, the benefits of this connection for the town would grow substantially. It will also be important to know the extent of existing residential and business interest.

If Marion Cross were to resolve its septic issues in another way, resolution of their issues would no longer be a benefit of this connection. On the other hand, there would be a longer time horizon for planning, which could have benefits.

Costs

There are several costs or potential costs to consider:

- The costs to the town, net of any grants, of connecting to the sewer system. This cost would likely be much higher if the town were connecting on its own, without the Dresden School district.
- The costs of maintaining the system, including the costs of dealing with any future pump failures or other critical repair issues.
- The administrative burden on town staff of making and monitoring the connection and administering any grants that may be needed.
- Some town residents are concerned that installing a sewer system could lead to an explosion of growth that would change the character of the town.
- One challenge is that Norwich has not completed its land use planning for the Route 5 South and village areas. In a perfect world, this planning would be completed first, before sewer were considered further, but that would not line up with the timeline for the school district which has a time-sensitive need. (On the other hand, there is relatively little land available for

development and so it may be possible to accelerate this planning process if needed to fit within the timetable.)

- Officials and staff of the town of Harford have raised a number of questions and concerns that should also be addressed.

To better understand these costs and how to mitigate these concerns, we need more information. In particular, it would be helpful to know:

1. What does Dresden estimate as the cost of connecting Marion Cross to the Hartford School system?
2. What would the incremental costs be to expand the pipe to a level that is wide enough to accommodate any additional capacity the town wished to secure?
3. What type of reserve or insurance is needed to address future repair needs, and how much should be set aside for this purpose?
4. What options are available to limit the number of residential units / businesses that connect to the sewer system so as to mitigate concerns about excessive growth and limit possible future financial risk to the town?
5. What are the prospects for generating user fees to help cover the costs of the connection and future maintenance?
6. What are the prospects for obtaining grants to help fund part of the costs, and how difficult would it be to administer the grant?
7. What are the nature of the concerns of staff and officials in Hartford and how could those concerns be addressed?

I would like answers to these questions before rendering an overall opinion on the advisability of seeking this connection, but it appears to me that the costs would be lowest if the town were working in partnership with the school district and that some of the concerns that have been raised could be mitigated by: (a) creating a reserve funded through user fees to cover the costs of maintaining the system and (b) limiting the number of units / businesses that can connect to the sewer system.

Next Steps

Since a joint effort between Norwich and the Dresden School district has a better preliminary benefit-cost profile and is more time-sensitive than a town-only effort, I recommend we focus on the joint project at this time, and consider whether to pursue a town-only process only if the joint effort does not bear fruit.

Once we have compiled and considered everyone's views on the benefits and costs, I would suggest two next steps:

1. I recommend that Norwich planning commission reach out to the Hartford planning commission to learn more about their concerns with the Dresden School District's proposal and to discuss whether, and if so, how the concerns might be addressed. We should discuss in particular what the town of Norwich could add by being involved in the discussions and the possibility of potentially negotiating an intermunicipal agreement between Hartford and Norwich that would provide a framework for considering any future proposals to connect to Hartford's sewer system.
2. I also recommend that we systematically try to address all of the outstanding questions so as to gather the information needed to make a more informed decision about next steps.

NORWICH PLANNING COMMISSION
Thursday March 4, 2021, 6:30pm

DRAFT MINUTES

Zoom Meeting

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/85037446838>

Meeting ID: 850 3744 6838

Members Present: Melissa Horwitz (C), Brian Loeb, Jaci Allen, Jeff Lubell, Leah Romano, Ernie Ciccotelli, Jeff Goodrich
Public Present: Mary Layton, Stuart Richards, Linda Cook, Roger Arnold, Claudette Brochu, Jamie Teague, Hannah Tyler, Linda Gray, Robert Gere, Neil Odell, Tom Candon
Staff: Rod Francis

Meeting Opened: 6:33pm

1. Approve Agenda:

Lubell moved and Romano seconded a motion to approve the Agenda as amended by merging items seven (PC members questions and thoughts on wastewater issues) and eight (Continued discussion with Planning Director on wastewater issues). Motion carried 5 – 0 – 1.

2. Meeting Objectives:

- Appoint Planning Commission Member to Article 36 Energy Task Force
- Discussion of wastewater issues
- Update from Tom Candon (MCS Board Chair) on wastewater

3. Public Comment: Goodrich asked to be recognized as a member of the public and then told the meeting that any hate speech directed towards him would cause him to leave the meeting.

Stuart Richards asked for clarification of the time allotted at the end of the meeting for public comment. Chair Horwitz confirmed that the time set was 15 minutes.

4. Review and approve Minutes January 28, 2021:

Allen moved and Romano seconded a motion to approve the minutes of January 28, 2021. Motion carried 6 – 0 – 1.

5. Announcements, Reports, Updates & Correspondence:

- Correspondence: Lubell asked that a memo he circulated via email to Commissioners after the packet was posted be included in the record of the meeting.

Goodrich moved and Loeb seconded a motion to include the Lubell memo in the packet for this meeting. Motion carried 7 – 0.

- Updates: none

6. Appoint Planning Commission Member to Article 36 Energy Task Force:

Chair Horwitz introduced the item by reading Article 36. Ciccotelli expressed interest Loeb moved and Lubell seconded a motion to recommend the Selectboard appoint Ciccotelli to the Energy Task Force. Goodrich commented that he was not going to support the motion if the Commission will not follow Open Meeting Law. Motion carried 6 – 1.

7. Discussion of wastewater issues (including updates from Tom Candon, NSD):

Tom Candon, Chair of the Norwich School District (NSD) updated the meeting on work by NSD to resolve ongoing on-site wastewater issues at Marion Cross School (MCS). Three options have been investigated a) replacing the system *in-situ* b) using the adjoining Piesch parcel c) processing wastewater at the Dresden School district playing fields and d) connecting to the Hartford municipal system. Testing of the Village Green (part of the MCS property) has been conducted by Jeff Goodrich of Pathways Consulting and Steve Revell of Lincoln Applied Geology. Recently effort has been directed at keeping lines of communication open. Examples of this include

attending the Town of Hartford Selectboard meeting on February 9, 2021 where the Selectboard was considering whether or not to continue discussions on the content of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between Hartford and NSD. The MOU was intended to layout the roles and obligations of the parties with regard to a proposal from NSD to establish a forcemain that would connect MCS, The Hanover Coop Service Center, King Arthur Baking (KAB) and the Norwich Commerce Park (Foggs) to the Hartford sewer service at Olcott Drive. The Hartford Selectboard communicated an expectation that any further discussions would require a commitment to an inter-municipal agreement between Hartford and the Town of Norwich.

Candon outlined that other proposals were still under consideration including using Dresden playing fields as a site for processing waste.

Allen suggested it is now clear that the Town of Norwich and NSD need to work together.

Lubell identified broader questions this proposal raised connected to town plan policies and action items such as ensuring more housing that is affordable to more people. He emphasized the opportunity for synergy between NSD and the town. The right response to this issue could achieve multiple objectives for Norwich. It is therefore important to hold off on making a final decision on may inter-municipal agreement. We should reach out to the Hartford Planning Commission to discuss planning issues in common.

Chair Horwitz asked for clarification on how and if the Planning Commission is going to work with NSD with regard to other options for solving the MCS wastewater problem. Lubell replied that other options could come out of continued dialogue.

Loeb said that he was happy to pursue a quick solution, but that if the “Hartford solution” was going to be pursued it would be better to broaden the scope of the project to make it more appealing to Hartford.

Goodrich identified two properties (Unitarian Church and Kid’s Place) in Norwich that are currently connected to the Hartford municipal sewer.

Romano thanked all the people who brought information to the discussion. She agreed that the best, appropriately timed solutions should be pursued. She went on to identify a series of process questions that would need to be addressed if the Planning Commission was to make a recommendation to the Planning Commission.

Francis outlined that the document he included in the packet was a more formal restatement of issues he raised at the last meeting. The document under review identifies key “pieces of the puzzle” and includes four maps, one representing the NSD proposal and alternatives that suggest possible solutions to addressing the MCS wastewater issue while achieving broader goals identified in the town plan that would be examined in a formal wastewater study.

Lubell restated his interest in fostering communication between the two towns, Norwich and Hartford.

Allen expressed concerns about the identified funding sources and suggested that this issue needs more attention.

Romano suggested that we need to continue to ask questions to fill in other “pieces of the puzzle”. And be prepared to build a FAQ or something similar to inform the public.

Loeb asked for comments from Teague and Candon on the suggestion to broaden out the NSD proposal.

Candon expressed frustration with the lack of prior consultation between Francis the NSD and SAU. He went on to acknowledge that there were concerns expressed in the Hartford meeting with regard to “opening the floodgates”. Candon expressed a hope that conversations will take place with the new Town Manager and new Selectboard in Hartford.

Candon acknowledged that if the connection to Harford is not feasible other options will be explored. He suggested that he would be appreciative of the Planning Commission withholding making a recommendation to the Norwich Selectboard now.

Lubell asked Candon if there was a possibility of discussing a re-conceptualized project that would come about from recognizing shared interests between the Town of Norwich and the NSD. Candon responded that he can’t answer this until he hears from the new Hartford Town Manager and Selectboard.

Francis outlined his responsibilities with regard to providing planning support to the Town through reporting to the Selectboard and then the Selectboard and reminded the Planning Commission that the public policy concerns raised by the proposal.

Lubell expressed disappointment that NSD was not open to contemplating a broader solution.

Teague replied that to broaden discussions would require Candon to go back to the full board.

8. Other Business: None

9. Public Comment: Roger Arnold acknowledged the frustration surrounding how the conversation on wastewater has come about. He then urged meeting participants to remember that the embracing of conflict and working through issues in this way is an example of good governance.

Stuart Richards thanked Jamie Teague and Tom Candon for all their work.

Meeting adjourned: 8:30pm

Future Meetings:

Thursday, March 25, 6:30pm Regular Meeting

Respectfully submitted,

Rod Francis