

Legislators question price tag on capital projects

by Kate Goldsmith

The County Legislature’s approval of a \$1.8 million bond to fund capital projects has some legislators concerned about cost-effectiveness and whether some of the proposed work is even necessary. One in particular, Democrat Rich Perkins of Hyde Park, took extraordinary measures to prove a point, although he has received flak from colleagues across the aisle who say he went too far.

At the Legislature’s March 10 meeting, there was brisk discussion on one of the projects, a proposed new well at the county’s Auto Service Center (ASC). According to Department of Public Works Commissioner Noel Knille, the county’s Department of Health has determined that the water at the ASC is not potable, and \$100,000 has been earmarked for an engineer to determine the best way to improve the water quality.

The facility, on Salt Point Turnpike near Dutchess County BOCES, falls within District 7, which Perkins represents.

“My district is primarily well recipients, and I know that there are some common problems, iron, sulfur, manganese. We all have very similar water,” said Perkins. “The first thing we should do is look at the water [treatment] system.”

On March 7, Perkins sent an e-mail to his fellow legislators stating: “I would like to suggest that we get a commercial water treatment professional (or two) to evaluate

(for free) before proceeding. ... Drilling has usually been reserved for a quantity issue (insufficient production). If the treatment is failing or substandard, generally you need to repair, enhance or replace the treatment system.”

On March 10, the day of the Legislature meeting, Perkins sent a follow-up e-mail to his colleagues, stating that he had revisited the site with a professional from Sterling Pump and “found that the water is NOT being treated accept [sic] for UV [water purification].” The chlorination device was deemed inoperable, the potash injector was empty and the water softener and filter were inoperable.

The e-mail included recommendations for water treatment and added that a rough budget estimate for a new treatment system was \$6,000.

When asked to confirm Perkins’ e-mail statements regarding the current water treatment system at the ASC, Commissioner Knille said it has an operational chlorinator and UV light, and the potash injector was last filled on Feb. 7. She said the water softener hasn’t been used for five years because its function was replaced by the potash injector; and carbon filter is not being used because it was considered unnecessary “since it is intended to remove chlorine, and the overall system is actually adding chlorine.”

Perkins again shared his findings with the legislators and Knille at the March 10 meeting. What Perkins saw as advocating

for taxpayers was interpreted very differently by GOP legislators, and they expressed their opinions.

Majority Leader Angela Flesland (Poughkeepsie) was visibly angry that Perkins had brought the water treatment professional to the ASC because he is not a bonded contractor, saying it was “setting a really dangerous precedent” and put the county at risk of liability if the person had been injured on site. She noted the issue falls under the purview of the Department of Public Works, not the Legislature.

That sentiment was echoed in statements by James Miccio (Fishkill) who said he has been a licensed water plant operator since 1978.

“It’s the epitome of micro-managing a department. That’s not what we [legislators] do,” said Miccio. “Next week he’ll [Perkins] probably be going out to car dealers and find out if we can get cheaper prices on the cars.”

Miccio called Perkins’ suggestion a “Band Aid,” noting that it might save a little money now but would have to be maintained and/or upgraded later, and over the years “you don’t get people to maintain them [treatment systems] as well as they should be.”

Sue Serino, also a Hyde Park legislator, was kinder in her comments.

“He [Perkins] has his heart into this,” said Serino. “He always does, and I understand what he was doing for his constituents, and I appreciate that.”

Democrat Joel Tyner (Rhinebeck/Clinton) said he commended Perkins “for doing due diligence on this particular issue.” He added: “We owe it to ourselves if we’re spending \$1.8 million that every penny of that better dam well be money well spent.”

Speaking by telephone a few days after

the meeting, Perkins said: “I want the people at the garage to have good water. I don’t want them to be endangered at all. ... There’s an issue I have, that we spend taxpayers’ money to make an environment better than taxpayers have themselves.”

Perkins also said projects shouldn’t be bundled together as they were with this resolution.

“We continue to behave the way the state and federal governments do, which is to lump everything together,” he said, “and because there are some extremely valid and needed projects, it’s very difficult for people to vote against it as a whole.”

Other capital projects at the ASC include installing a security system (\$125,000), refurbishing Garage Building #2 (\$250,000) and refurbishing the Main Repair Garage Building #1 (\$350,000). Project design, construction management and permitting have been budgeted \$175,000.

The DPW also has allotted \$800,000 to replace the leaking roof at the County Records Retention Facility on Washington Street.

At the March 10 meeting, Red Hook Legislator Micki Strawinski questioned Commissioner Knille about details of the estimate, which translates to about \$6,100 per square foot of roof.

“It seems like \$6,100 a square [foot] is an enormous amount of money,” said Strawinski.

The commissioner said the estimate includes the design fee, removal of the existing roof; and there are several unknown factors, such as whether asbestos removal would be necessary.

Knille said the design phase would take four to five months; she expected work to begin on projects in about six months.

Omega Institute

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the proposals, the power lines would run through the Omega Institute’s western border. Omega is a member of the Hudson Valley Smart Energy Coalition, which formed to evaluate the need for greater energy transmission, and to investigate alternatives, should need be established.

Developers are in the process of modifying their proposals to try and stay within existing rights-of-way so land and homes will not be taken by eminent domain. However, Omega and other businesses and landowners in the path of the proposed power lines can’t move forward until a project is approved by the Public Service Commission (PSC). The process can take several years to complete.

“We’ve stepped back from a timeline in development,” said Backus. “We are waiting for some sense of security.”

Backus was planning an \$8-\$12 million kitchen and dining hall renovation, but has halted the project out of uncertainty about Omega’s future.

“Omega is a holistic, experiential learning center rooted in the integration of the natural environment and development of human consciousness,” said Backus. “It’s hard to imagine how to deliver to our participants that core experience of being connected to nature [if new transmission towers are built].”

Backus is also concerned about potential electromagnetic frequency, flashing light that would destroy the night sky, and an overall change in landscape.

“There are power lines that run along our western border, but they’re not visible from campus. If they take more land and expand the corridor, then you will most likely see those from campus,” he said. “It would change people’s view from a natural landscape to an industrial landscape.”

Backus is forced to consider: “Do we need to go somewhere else?”

“Your assets are suspended by a long process,” he said. “The only sane result I could come up with is: wait.”

The halted project also means the loss of business to local Williams Lumber and Home Centers, where Omega purchases materials for capital projects.

“There’s already economic impact,” said Backus. “How is one in business when we’re left in limbo like this?”

Backus is also concerned about damage to wetland habitats along Omega’s western

border. He said, “We are actively involved in trying to move the proposal to a place where there’s not an environmental impact.” Omega commissioned Hudsonia, an Annandale-based institute whose work focuses on the natural environment, to create a habitat map of Omega’s 200 acres.

Erik Kiviat, executive director of Hudsonia, found Blanding’s turtles and northern cricket frogs living in the wetland. The Blanding’s turtle is threatened in New York State, and northern cricket frogs are endangered.

“The power line project is very much of concern because there could be impacts on wetlands that those two species use most of the time. Whenever there is construction, there will be some soil erosion and siltation of wetland bodies,” said Kiviat. “Engineers on projects like this always say they’ll do ‘a,’ ‘b,’ and ‘c’ to prevent siltation of wetlands, but it’s almost impossible to prevent siltation. I’m very concerned about impacts from soil disturbance.”

Kiviat explained that the Long Pond ecosystem, part of the area that would be affected by the power lines project, is uncommon in this region.

“It has a lot of calcium in it that produces conditions that support unusual habitats and plants and animals, in addition to the turtle and frog,” he said. “It’s circumneutral: neither acidic or alkaline, near pH 7. In this region, that kind of lake occurs where there is limestone bedrock, which has a lot of cracks, so it’s very permeable. That makes it easy for water pollutants to move into the limestone and into the lake.”

Soil disruption causes the release of silt and nitrogen. “That’s harmful to any lake, but especially that kind of lake [circumneutral],” said Kiviat.

Backus is concerned about the destruction of this unusual habitat and believes decision-makers must consider seriously all losses before embarking on a project that will have irreversible impacts.

“Before we rip out that swamp, I want everybody to stand next to that swamp and think about what it’s going to look like when it’s gone,” said Backus. His concerns are far-reaching.

“We’re not just protecting our western border. We’re a member of the community and the Hudson Valley,” he said. “The proposals are backward to where we’re going with the community.”



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