

ANALYSIS: Sewer plant a liability

By COLIN READ, Everybody's Business

August 02, 2009 06:12 am

— Sometimes the cruelest thing we do to ourselves is to hide the sad truths we all know.

I listen to visitor after visitor, and, most notably of late, President Charlie Evans of the Wal-Mart FLW Tour fishing tournament. They all speak in wonderful terms about the beauty and treasure that is Lake Champlain.

I have lamented on this page before how we often forget that truth ourselves. We have not prized access to the lake. Its shores have been the home to garbage dumps, oil tanks, railroad tracks, meth labs, fast-food restaurants, industrial buildings and a sewage-treatment plant. Were someone to design Plattsburgh from scratch, none of these would exist along the lake.

We do have a beautiful beach adjoining the City of Plattsburgh. The ugly secret is that one of our most wonderful attractions is sometimes closed because of runoff that overloads a sewage treatment plant well beyond its prime.

To be fair, there are a number of reasons why we might want to keep this legacy plant.

First, it is already built and paid for, and sewage treatment plants can be expensive.

Second, it has abundant capacity, designed to handle a growing town and city, and an Air Force base.

Third, the city derives income from it, and the Town of Plattsburgh has a long-term contract at favorable rates to use the plant.

Fourth, the plant meets required standards and has many years of life left.

However, its liabilities may be more extensive, should a careful analysis support these claims.

First, the overall system is at some critical times unable to handle the combination of sewage and rain runoff during heavy summer rains. Unfortunately, summer is also the time the beach is stocked with tourists and visitors, creating legitimate concerns on their part, and perhaps even legal liabilities.

Second, it is an old plant, and is unable to perform the primary, secondary and tertiary treatments that a newer plant can do. New plants are able to more effectively segment runoff and sewage, and are multi-stage units that can more thoroughly cleanse the effluent of biological toxins and the phosphates that are contributing to Lake Champlain pollution.

Third, the value of the downtown land devoted to the existing plant is much more significant than any other location we could imagine for a new plant. Not only is the land more valuable, but the land adjoining the existing plant would also rise significantly in value if the plant were relocated.

Fourth, the existing location is a hindrance to development of a downtown hotel. I have heard one major developer say that he would have developed that hotel were it not for the sewage treatment plant. I can understand. I too would be reticent to rent a hotel room that looks out over a sewage treatment plant.

Fifth, while I have not actually toured the plant, I have heard others mention that the building has structural problems that ought to be addressed.

Sixth, a new plant may be eligible for state aid designed to further the green economy. Plattsburgh could definitely use that shot into the economy, and would allow us to market the green values tourists increasingly seem to appreciate.

Now, I am not a sewage treatment engineer, so my intuition may not stand up to the scrutiny of close analysis. However, I envision a plant that is co-located, and works in a symbiotic way with a local wetland. I understand the secondary cleansing ability of a wetlands working with a sewage treatment plant is an effective strategy that would produce a much cleaner discharge into Lake Champlain.

For instance, there is an existing wetland behind Georgia Pacific and the co-generation plant that may be ideal for such a plant. That location is certainly not prime real estate, and already has industrial plants in the area. I would be very interested in a professional analysis of the cost and quality of locating a new sewage treatment plant in that or a similar location.

It would also be necessary to determine the enhanced real estate values, development potential, real estate tax revenue potential, and user costs of such a relocation. These likely benefits and costs can be weighed with the chances of receiving state or federal grants to get the project off the ground.

The reality, though, is that the sewage treatment plant seems like the third rail of local politics. One brings it up at their peril. There are a lot of entities dependent on the existing status quo. Both the city and the town find the plant reasonably lucrative or inexpensive, and jobs would need to be relocated. Users appreciate the low cost of a plant built decades ago and likely long since paid for. Finally, some simply do not want to entertain change at this juncture.

To those skeptics, I again state that no fresh design for the city would ever place that plant at that location. Should we be forever wed to that existing location because of an artifact of an unfortunate history?

I do think there is one thing we can all agree upon. If the plant burned down tomorrow, we would all agree to relocate a plant that will be cleaner and must have at least the current plant capacity to allow our economy to grow.

Taking this approach a bit further, if we discovered we would have to spend x millions of dollars on the plant to extend its life y years, or spend z dollars more to built a new state-of-the-art plant somewhere else, there is some x , y , and z out there that we all would agree commend to a new plant at a new location. We can sit down and discuss the numbers, including the alternative value of the land at and adjoining the existing plant, and the aesthetic values of a more accessible beach. These are important numbers that may outswamp the savings of a plant that is bought and paid for.

The only remaining issue then is to calculate the x , y , and z 's. Are we up to it? After all, the discussion could provide us with some contingencies for the inevitable day that we must build a new plant. And, the truth shall set us free from having to debate this issue again!

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