

Opening Up an Expensive Can of Worms

At Tuesday's Town Board meeting (August 6) Supervisor Grace is expected to ask Councilmen Bianco, Murphy, Paganelli and Patel for their vote to move ahead with his Depot Square project.

He's expected to ask the Board for money (possibly \$20,000-\$25,000) for a Phase II Environmental Study (see below) of the existing highway garage site, as well as additional money to hire an architect and site planner for a new highway garage.

There are many reasons to support the Depot Square plan: aesthetics, efficiency, increased tax rateables, etc. Interestingly, the idea of relocating the highway garage is not new: In a 1982 referendum, voters were asked to approve a \$1.9 million bond issue to build a new "vehicle maintenance center" on Route 202 where the police department is currently located. The voters rejected the plan, voting 2,487 against to 1,631 for.

But — there are also many reasons why the Town Board should act slowly and cautiously before proceeding with Depot Square. Spending \$20,000+ now could very well open up an expensive can of worms. Taxpayers could be signing a blank check now to pave the way for a future project that might never materialize.

Before Councilmen Bianco, Murphy, Paganelli and Patel blindly agree to Supervisor Grace's monetary requests, they need to do their own due diligence and get answers to three basic questions:

1. What's involved in relocating the highway garage?
2. What are the potential cost implications to taxpayers of doing a Phase II Environmental Study?
3. Is this the right time to proceed with the project?

1. Future site for the highway garage

The only site that's being considered for the highway garage is the town's organic recycling facility (aka, the Hill) on Greenwood Street adjacent to the sewage treatment plant. The site is currently used for wood chipping, composting the dried sludge from the treatment plant and the storage of road salt and other highway department supplies and vehicles.

On his recent television program, Supervisor Grace said that that the existing sludge composting operation should be eliminated in order to make room for the highway garage, plus a second building for the Parks Department, and a third shared vehicle washing building. Although eliminating the sludge operation was never part of his original plan, Supervisor Grace has since determined that it will be more cost effective to truck out the sludge rather than compost it.

Has a detailed cost analysis of alternate ways to dispose of the sludge been done? If so, has Supervisor Grace shared it with the four other members of the Town Board and the public? And, if the town eliminates the sludge composting operation, will the remaining wood chipping operation make financial sense?

Is there a written conceptual plan for the future development of the overall site that includes the existing uses (with or without the sludge composting operation), plus the three new buildings, plus the upgraded internal road network and the new stormwater facilities that will be required by DEC and DEP?

How can Councilmen Bianco, Murphy, Paganelli or Patel justify a vote to spend money for an architect to design a new highway garage on the former sludge composting site without first having evaluated the cost effectiveness of changing the sludge removal operation?

2. Phase II Environmental Study

A Phase II Environmental Study identifies the presence of contamination in the soil and is done after a more general Phase I study finds a *Recognized Environmental Condition*. The study is done by drilling sample test borings into the soil and, if needed, installing monitoring wells over a period of time.

IF the Phase II study identifies the presence of contaminated soil, the town will be required to remove the contamination — regardless of the cost. But — the town won't know what the cost of the clean-up will be until *after* the clean-up is completed: the clean-up continues until there is no more contamination — but the town won't know how much contamination there is until it starts the clean-up. Cleaning up an environmentally contaminated site is an open ended cost: once you start, you don't know what the final bill will be.

Remember the 2009 decades old spill at the Water Department that ended up costing taxpayers about \$100,000? How much could the highway garage clean-up cost: \$50,000, \$100,000, \$150,000, more?

In previous statements, Supervisor Grace has stated that because the highway garage site was never used for manufacturing, he doesn't expect there to be any serious contamination.

But that's not what the Phase I study says. (See link below for a copy of the report.) The report states:

- “Given the past history of the site as a highway department garage and metal manufacturing company as well as the possibility that the facility historically may have been used as a Town dump, *Recognized Environmental Conditions* exist at the SITE.”
- The report also states that: “...several of the immediately surrounding properties and/or businesses may pose an environmental threat to the subject site including the gasoline service stations and the auto repair/auto body shops.”
- And, the report notes that there are two active and open DEC spills on the site

Does this sound like potential “minimal” contamination?

Of course, one can always argue, as the Supervisor does, that as good stewards of the environment, we have a moral responsibility to clean up any contamination we know about. But — do we have a moral obligation to go “looking for” environmental problems?

And what if a buyer for the property never materializes? Or relocating the highway garage becomes a more expensive project than originally thought? Then what? Are Councilmen Bianco, Murphy, Paganelli and Patel ready to sign a blank check to clean-up a site for a future project that might never materialize?

3. Is this the right time for the project?

- Given Yorktown's other critical infrastructure needs (drainage, buildings with leaking roofs, road paving, etc.) is this the time to focus on replacing a building that, while not ideal, is still functional?

- Given the existing retail and office vacancies in town, is this the time to add more commercial space?
- When has Supervisor Grace sat down — in public — with Councilmen Bianco, Murphy, Paganelli and Patel and prioritized all the town's many capital needs?

Supervisor Grace may subscribe to a “jump and figure out how I’m going to land on the way down” approach to governing. Hopefully Councilmen Bianco, Murphy, Paganelli and Patel have a more thoughtful and more cautious approach to governing. Hopefully, they believe in planning before jumping.

Let the four councilmen know how you feel about Depot Square before August 6.

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