



# Rockingham Planning Commission

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## MEMORANDUM

**MEMO TO:** RPC Commissioners  
**FROM:** Cliff Sinnott, Executive Director  
**DATE:** September 7, 2000  
**SUBJECT:** Preliminary Feasibility Study - Piscataqua River Basin Wastewater Discharge Project

At the Commission meeting next Wednesday you will hear an interesting presentation from Frank Underwood of Underwood Engineers, Portsmouth about a preliminary study the firm is proposing to look at the feasibility of a regional system to collect treated wastewater from treatment plants in the Piscataqua River Basin for discharge in the lower Piscataqua River. The purpose of such a system would be to relieve existing and future capacity constraints at these wastewater facilities by transferring their discharge to a higher volume waterbody where the required dilution factors will be more easily achieved (i.e. with less treatment). (The concept is similar to that used in the Winnepesaukee Basin where discharges are transferred to Franklin, and by Salem when it joined the Greater Lawrence Sanitary District thus transferring its discharge from the Spicket River to the Merrimack River). Obviously, this a proposal that, if implemented, will have regional significance and which warrants our attention.

Mr. Underwood met with Cynthia Copeland (SRPC Exec. Director) and me to discuss the project in July. Before that, he had held meetings with communities and other groups in the region. He indicated at our July meeting that he may be seeking our Commissions' support and possibly our cooperation in applying for NH Estuary or Coastal Program funds to conduct a "pre-preliminary" or work plan study for the project. At that time I suggested he attend our September or October meeting to present information about the project.

I will not be able to attend the meeting on Wednesday, but wanted to pass along some of my initial thoughts. In brief, I think the concept is worth exploring and that we should cooperate in seeking funding for the initial study.

The concept appears to have two major benefits. First, it has potential cost savings benefits to the communities with existing wastewater treatment outfalls on the tributary rivers of the Great Bay. As the communities grow, and as EPA wastewater dilution standards are tightened, it will become increasingly difficult for these plants to meet treatment requirements without major and costly upgrades. Second, by displacing the treated effluent (secondary treatment in all cases) to a discharge point well downstream, we can expect significant water quality improvements in the Great Bay and its tributary rivers.

I can think of three potential risks as well, two direct and one indirect. First, there may be negative water quality impacts to the river near the discharge point and these would have to be carefully weighed against the benefits. Second, the cost of design, construction and operation of the system will certainly be very large and might prove to be more than the cost of upgrading the individual plants.

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Third, is the potential the project would have to stimulate significant additional growth in the region if the effect was to "take the lid off" growth constraints imposed by existing wastewater treatment capacity. This would not necessarily be a bad thing, especially considering that it would tend to direct growth to already developed areas and perhaps reduce development pressures elsewhere. It might even prove to be a catalyst for promoting the kind of compact, mixed use and village type development patterns that we have been advocating. Nonetheless it would increase the development potential of the entire Great Bay region - a consequence that may trouble some people.

As a regional planning commission I believe it is our job to explore concepts like what is being proposed, and to think hard about their consequences. I raise the growth implication in particular not to scare us away from the project, but to emphasize that it should be included as a central element of both the work plan and the eventual feasibility study.

Hopefully this background information will give you some points of discussion for Wednesday's presentation. Attached are excerpts from an initial study summary prepared by Underwood Engineers in 1996 which will provide some details about the proposal.