

Sewer work in Winslow may raise Vassalboro water costs

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Winslow Public Works Director Paul Fongemie walks past 16-inch sewer line on April 10 at the Chaffee Brook Pump Station in Winslow. The pipe will replace the existing line that runs beneath the Kennebec River to Waterville's Kennebec Sanitary Treatment District. *Rich Abrahamson/Morning Sentinel file*
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WINSLOW — Town officials allocated several million dollars this week to a long-delayed sewage and flood infrastructure project that has been subject to repeated delays and a rising budget in recent years.

To finance the replacement of sewage systems in Winslow's Sunset Heights neighborhood, the Town Council voted unanimously at its Monday meeting to issue up to \$6 million in bonds to finance the \$9 million project, which aims to curb frequent flooding in the neighborhood.

The project is part of a wider multimillion-dollar effort to replace and repair Winslow's aging sewer systems, which has suffered months of delays and million-dollar budget increases.

The increases may further impact residents of downstream Vassalboro, where officials have cited Winslow's rising costs as a driver of skyrocketing sewer bills.

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Updating Winslow's sewage system is critical to preventing flooding and "overflow events" where thousands of gallons of Winslow's raw sewage spills into the Kennebec River, according to Town Manager Ella Bowman.

Work has been delayed for several reasons, including a flood last year and securing federal permits this year, according to Bowman.

"Municipalities across the state are doing these projects that need to be done, and there's not enough construction companies to do all the work," she said. "It's not competitive anymore. When you go to a bidding situation, you're paying more money for it because of supply and demand."

"Plus inflation, and this escalator of rising costs everywhere, everything is getting more expensive," she added.

The town also is dedicating roughly \$8 million to replacing the Chaffee Brook Pump Station, which handles and treats all of Winslow's sewage and pumps it in a single pipe beneath the Kennebec River to the Kennebec Sanitary Treatment District in Waterville.

The station was originally built in 1970 and has not been updated since 1998. It frequently suffers floods and "overflow events," in which hundreds of thousands of gallons of raw sewage spill into the Kennebec River, according to Winslow Public Works Director Paul Fongemie.

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Over \$8 million has been allocated to repairing the pump station so far, Bowman said. The project will replace nearly every aspect of the station, including its massive sewage pumps, the pipe underneath the Kennebec River and even the building itself.

Though the updates were slated to begin last November, they were delayed several months by an extensive federal permitting process and flooding in December.

"We would have had phase one completed by now if not for the storm of Dec. 18," Bowman said. "Phase one is the line under the river. Phase two is the actual pump station upgrade."

The station has also handled all of the Vassalboro Sanitary District's sewage since a massive 2020 infrastructure project overhauled the town's sewer system. The project and subsequent connection to Winslow's system has brought skyrocketing sewer bills for the VSD's roughly 200 customers in the time since.

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Vassalboro customers must pay a fee to use Winslow's system, which officials raised this year. VSD board members have cited the cost as a major driver of rising sewer rates.

"They added a million dollars to the Chaffee Brook project budget due to permits and labor shortages, which means they can be having a price increase," board member Rebecca Goodrich said at a VSD meeting in April. "I'm gonna say yes, we're gonna have a price increase, but how much? I have no idea."

The Vassalboro Sanitary District is a quasi-private company separated from the town's government in 2017. It is governed by a five-person board of trustees, only one of whom does not live in Vassalboro: Lee Trahan, who is also a member of Winslow's Town Council.

Winslow councilors first approved up to \$6.8 million in bonds for upgrades to the Chaffee Brook station in February 2023, but its cost has grown by several million in the time since. Roughly \$2.7 million of the original funds came from a Maine Department of Transportation grant.

The town previously added \$1 million to the Chaffee Brook project's budget in April, citing staffing shortages and the federal permitting process as drivers of the added cost.

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In October, before Bowman's appointment as town manager and half of the current councilors' elections, the Town Council voted unanimously to add about \$1.3 million to the project's budget, citing regulatory requirements, aging infrastructure and flooding concerns.

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