

Christopher French
Town of Vassalboro
LD 832

Senator Lawrence, Representative Sachs, and respected members of the Energy, Utilities, & Technology Committee (E.U.T.C.), my name is Christopher J. French. I am the senior elected selectboard member representing the Town of Vassalboro. In addition to the time and consideration of the E.U.T.C. has scheduled to review LD 832, I would like to extend my gratitude to Senator Bradstreet and Representative Collins, for their commitment to providing a resolution on behalf of the ratepayers of the Vassalboro Sanitary District (VSD/district). The rate payers of the district have been negatively impacted by untenable sewer rates directly tied to the cost of infrastructure improvements. This financial crisis has been compounded by generationally high inflation, increased cost of essentials including utilities, food, home heating, and the lack of available options in the means of affordable housing. Many of these families have no choice but to stay put and attempt to navigate rising user fees associated with an unsurmountable debt service, rising district administrative costs, and increased user rates approved by the Town of Winslow, all spread across a very small number of rate payers. An alarming number of these homeowners are in crisis living on a fixed income, facing the reality of losing their homes through the legislative approved lien foreclosure process. I encourage the members of the E.U.T.C. to carefully review the facts of, and consider, the true impact LD 832 may have in relieving this financial quandary for those affected. The district has been a main stay for a small contingency of North & East Vassalboro residents along Route 32 and the Outlet stream for the past 50 years. Prior to the most recent construction the district relied on sand filters using the Outlet stream to carry the waste to the ocean. It is my understanding the district faced penalties due to non-compliance with the CLEAN WATER ACT and sought the advice of a contractor skilled in waste management. It was the contractor's recommendation, and least expensive method, to build out a system that connected to the Town of Winslow sewer district.

It is my interpretation after reviewing information and project timelines made available to the selectboard that the unforeseen timing of COVID played a crucial role due to pandemic related spikes in construction expenses. Once the project had commenced the district found themselves in a no-win situation and what was once considered to be a manageable debt service quickly converted into the albatross the district currently experiences. In addition to the debt service, the user rates charged by the Town of Winslow continue to remain in flux as our neighboring municipality attempts to manage their own infrastructure improvement costs that are passed down to the rate payers.

From a ten-thousand-foot view, the Town of Vassalboro's current housing stock numbers sit roughly around 2200 structures, approximately 200 (9% of the housing stock) are within the district's jurisdiction. To assist with defraying the cost of the sewer project the Vassalboro selectboard recommended establishing a Tax Increment Financing (TIF) zone which included the provision of allocating money to the sewer district upgrade. In 2014 the voters of the Town of Vassalboro adopted the recommended TIF ordinance. Since the ordinance approval the town has assisted the district in securing funds in excess of \$1.7 million through funding mechanisms such as Community Block Grants, TIF funding, and ARPA funding. Vassalboro's most recent contribution presented itself last year after the district requested consideration for TIF funds. The selectboard identified, to no fault of the districts, language connected with a prior selectboard approved TIF distribution amount of \$100,000.00. Language became an obstacle for the district to use the money in any meaningful manner. The Selectboard recalled those funds and reallocated them in a way consistent with the DECD standards as well as authorizing the distribution of an additional \$200,000.00 from the TIF to assist with debt services.

As our Town Manager has frequently stated, the Town of Vassalboro and the District maintain a symbiotic relationship, shared common vision, and goals focused on

improving the water quality of the Outlet stream while properly managing unprocessed water. The town remains committed to assisting the district find a solution towards reducing the liability of its rate payers, however we are requesting that our partners at the State find a path through an extremely difficult budgeting process to provide relief for the rate payers and help prevent some of our more vulnerable citizens from losing their homes. I encourage the E.U.T.C. to take the necessary steps favorable to passing LD 832.

Thank you for your consideration in this important matter.

Respectfully submitted,

Christopher J. French

Selectboard member, Town of Vassalboro