CITY OF PEEKSKILL
OFFICE OF THE MAYOR

John G. Testa
Mayor

Weeds May Provide Inexpensive Solution To Northern Westchester Sewage War.

"Artificial Wetlands" Can Clean Up Waste At Fraction Of Cost of Conventional Plants. World's Leading Expert to Lead Briefing On Topic At Peekskill City Hall.

Boating On The Hudson Magazine, City of Peekskill Mayor John Testa and County Legislator George Oros Sponsoring Special Technology Seminar To Take Place at 4:00 p.m. on Tuesday, Oct. 19 At City Hall on 840 Main Street.

For Immediate Release

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PEEKSKILL, NY—One of Westchester's most bitter and divisive conflicts could be brought to a swift and affordable end with the use of some of the most environmentally friendly technologies ever developed.

Research by Boating on the Hudson Magazine, the City of Peekskill, NY and County Legislator George Oros has determined that the use of artificial wetlands could give Yorktown, NY more than enough capacity to process its sewage while still meeting the stringent guidelines set by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation and the City of Peekskill, NY.

One of the world's leading experts on the technology will personally explain the potential of the technology for resolving the environmental battle between the two communities on Tuesday, Oct. 19 at Peekskill City Hall at 840 Main Street at 4:00 p.m. Such systems typically cost 75% less than conventional ones, something that could result in tens of millions in savings on the Yorktown facility.

Dr. Ronald Lavigne, a professor of environmental sciences at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst and president of New England Waste Systems Inc., has installed scores of artificial wetlands systems in places ranging from China to Upstate New York. "This technology is in use all over the world in places as cold as the Artic Circle or as hot as equatorial Ecuador," Dr. Lavigne says.

For over half a decade, Yorktown has been pushing to divert its sewage from its Hallock's Mill sewage treatment plant to the City of Peekskill's waste treatment facility. Residents and elected officials from Peekskill have strenuously opposed any such action. While Yorktown saw Peekskill as their solution to a growing problem, Peekskill officials have contended that it is an issue of protecting its own watershed and drinking water supply and that using one watershed as the solution for another is not fair or justified.

Numerous technological solutions are available that could resolve the conflict, says County Legislator George Oros, although the artificial wetlands system is one of the best. What is vital is that an energetic and thorough search for solutions be made, he says. Given the scope and variety of solutions that are available, it is certain that the Yorktown sewage situation can be resolved without having an impact on other communities.

"What I want to emphasize is that I felt all along there were ways to solve the problem at Hallock Mills without it ever coming to Peekskill," Oros says.

Implementation of an artificial wetlands system, also known as phytoremediation, could be one of the best ways to resolve the situation, says John Vargo, publisher and editor in chief of Boating on the Hudson magazine. Boating on the Hudson has done extensive research on the topic with the goal of keeping the Hudson River itself clean, he says.

“In the end, what we all want is a healthy environment for ourselves and our children,” Vargo says. “Use of an artificial wetlands system could provide that for Yorktown, reducing the environmental burden on both Peekskill and the Hudson River itself.”

Yorktown is located near critical areas of New York City’s watershed. It is under intense pressure from both the City and State of New York to resolve the issues created by its neglected and decaying sewage treatment plant.

“We understand how important resolving the sewage situation is to Yorktown,” says Peekskill Mayor John Testa. “That’s why we are happy to help find a resolution that is best for everyone involved,” he says. “By harnessing the power of nature, artificial wetlands systems could provide it,” he says.

Long used in Europe and around the world, artificial wetlands work by using densely packed wetlands plants to filter and process sewage. Artificial wetlands are extraordinarily efficient. Where conventional sewage treatment facilities can extract only about 80 gallons of water from 100 gallons of sludge, the reed beds that make up artificial wetlands can extract as much as 97 gallons of water from the same amount of waste, experts say.

Rather than relying on steel, concrete and toxic chemicals such as chlorine, artificial wetlands rely on the power of the sun and the sophistication of processes honed by billions of years of evolution to clean up wastewater, Dr. Lavigne says. In effect, they use beds of reeds instead of pipes, pumps, and toxins.

“What artificial wetlands do is to rely on the incredibly sophisticated biological systems present in ordinary wetlands plants such as Cattails,” says Mayor Testa. “No matter how sophisticated our technology is, we still can’t match that present in a single wetlands weed,” he says.

Artificial wetlands systems can cost as little as $10 a square foot to build. They are being used for everything from factories that employ just 300 people to serving a Chinese city of 4 million. Use of such systems is rising rapidly in the United States, with communities as close as Highlands, NY relying on them.

“In the early days of the clean water movement, the federal government showed an intense bias towards steel and concrete solutions. That bias has conditioned thinking in America to this day,” Vargo says. “The barriers to using these systems are really training and the rethinking of the way we treat our waste,” he says.

An added factor for Yorktown is the City of New York’s resistance to implementing new and different technologies. “I understand that this is taking the situation in a new and different direction,” Mayor Testa says. “But people must understand that things have changed in Peekskill in recent years. When our backs were up against the wall, we did what we had to do to make ends meet. Those times are over. We will not compromise the health and quality of life of our citizens to resolve another community’s problems,” he says.

Officials from Yorktown have been invited to Tuesday's event, and have been informed about artificial wetlands systems. They are welcome to attend, and the City of Peekskill will make a strong effort to provide them with all the relevant information they need, Testa says.

Land is a key component of any artificial wetlands system. The sand beds currently used at Hallock Mills take up two or three acres, and could probably be converted into reed beds that would have more than enough capacity to handle the community's waste, experts say. New Paltz, NY, is currently processing more than 30% of its sewage using a reed bed that is just a test facility.

One of the most noticeable things about reed bed systems is an absence. Because they use aerobic bacteria rather than the anaerobic bacteria, they don't smell. "Our reed bed is 100 feet from the neighbor's window and I've never had a complaint," said one engineer working on the New Paltz system.

"If anyone has any doubts about this technology, the City of Peekskill will gladly sponsor an inspection trip to one of the numerous Hudson Valley communities that are making us of it," Mayor Testa says.

Those looking for information about how artificial wetlands could be used to help Yorktown can check out the lead article in this month's issue of "Boating on the Hudson" at http://www.boatingonthehudson.com/currentissue/historyoftheworld.php.

For more information about the briefing, contact Mayor John Testa at 914-734-4105.

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