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The Journal News

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 26, 2022 | LOHUD.COM

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Pressure mounts for Westchester to build water filtration plant, but residents object

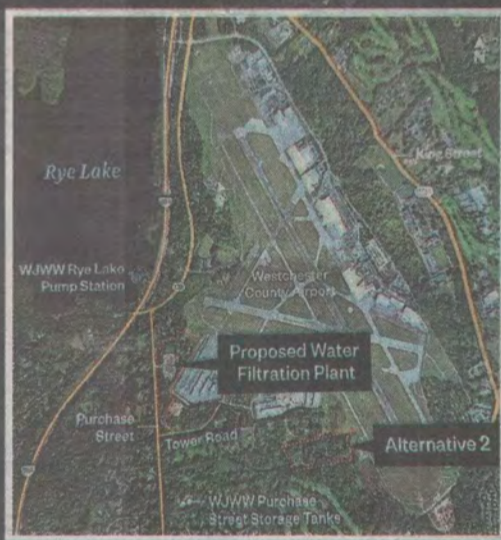


'We are under a very big gun'



Tax Watch
David McKay Wilson
Rockland/Westchester
Journal News

Facing fines that could exceed \$100 million, the Westchester Joint Water Works at long last has sought permission to build a filtration plant in Purchase to satisfy longstanding state and federal orders to purify water it draws from Rye Lake. • But stiff opposition has emerged to the facility, which would be located at Westchester County Airport, with runoff from the site draining into the very waters the plant hopes to protect. • The plan has an unusual twist: It requires approval from the Westchester County Board of Legislators because the WJWW wants to swap 13 acres of land

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An overhead look at where the proposed water filtration plant would be located. COURTESY OF WESTCHESTER JOINT WATER WORKS

TOP: The Westchester Joint Water Works building that houses its purification treatment system in Harrison. SETH HARRISON/THE JOURNAL NEWS

BOTTOM: "It will destroy the neighborhood," Peter Close, clerk of trustees at the Quaker Friends Meeting House, said of a planned \$138 million water filtration plant. "That construction project will go on for years." TANIA SAVAYAN/THE JOURNAL NEWS



\$28M will help 7 cities curb violence

Project RISE designed to aid community groups across state

Jonathan Bandler
Rockland/Westchester Journal News
USA TODAY NETWORK

Preventing violence and helping the communities where it is most prevalent are the goals of a new funding program that will send \$28 million to community groups in seven cities across New York state.

The state Division of Criminal Justice Services introduced Project RISE – Respond, Invest, Sustain and Empower – on Monday at the Mount Vernon Boys & Girls Club, promising a new paradigm for working with groups that are most attuned to the people who need to be steered from violence and the families most affected by it.

"This initiative is about working from the ground up and addressing the real needs of those who know these neighborhoods best," said Rossana Rosado, the criminal justice services commissioner. "We can't leave all this to law enforcement. They can't possibly do this alone. They need help from the folks who actually live here."

The money will go directly to community groups in Yonkers, Mount Vernon, Newburgh, Rochester, Buffalo, Syracuse and Albany. Each city will have a steering committee that will identify the four most

See **VIOLENCE**, Page 4A

Ken Bright, who runs a reentry program for the formerly incarcerated in Mount Vernon, said he's eager to apply for Project RISE funds. JONATHAN BANDLER/THE JOURNAL NEWS

E. Ramapo touts hot food delivery at its schools

Nancy Cutler
Rockland/Westchester Journal News
USA TODAY NETWORK

SPRING VALLEY – East Ramapo is touting improvements to its food service at six elementary and middle schools on its website. Food at the schools, which are undergoing kitchen renovations, had been the subject of numerous complaints at school board meetings this year.

Parents and children at an Oct. 3 school board meeting said school meals were bad-tasting, and the cold food was sometimes spoiled and had caused tummy aches. Community activist Luis Niveló, during his comments, approached the dais and placed what he said were rotten apple slices in front of trustees, Superintendent Clarence Ellis and state-appointed education monitor Mary Fox-Alter.

Niveló, a Spring Valley resident, was served the

See **FOOD**, Page 4A

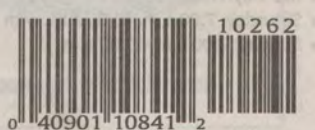
Several trustees commented later in the Oct. 3 meeting that the testimony by students ... had been disturbing.

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Peter Close, clerk of trustees at the Quaker Friends Meeting House, said of a planned \$138 million water filtration plant: "That construction project will go on for years. And it's a massive building that can't be hidden.." TANIA SAVAYAN/THE JOURNAL NEWS

Tax Watch

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it owns along the airport's southern boundary, where it first considered building the plant during the 2000s, to obtain the county property.

The filtration plant would serve an estimated 100,000 Westchester residents in Harrison, Mamaroneck, Rye and New Rochelle — about 10% of the county's residents.

The plan has emerged 18 years after the state Health Department ordered construction of a plant to eliminate concentrations of haloacetic acids, formed by the interaction of chlorine and naturally occurring organic material in the reservoir.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has acted as well, ordering the WJWW in 2019 to build the plant. That was the last year high concentrations of haloacetic acids were detected. While not posing an immediate health risk, these compounds can increase risks of cancer, liver disease and kidney disease, according to the project's final environmental impact statement.

Once estimated at \$108 million, the plant's cost has ballooned to \$138 million. The average WJWW water bill for residents of Harrison, the town and village of Mamaroneck, and some residents of New Rochelle would rise by 75% to \$1,650 over five years once the plant is constructed, according to the project's final environmental impact statement.

Mamaroneck Village Mayor Tom Murphy fears an even greater financial impact than the increased water rates if the plan gets stalled again, and state and federal regulators lower the boom and impose the fines.

"We are under a very big gun," said Murphy, who chairs the WJWW board, which comprises officials from the villages and towns of Mamaroneck and Harrison. "If we don't get it done in a timely fashion, we could be on the hook for millions in fines. We feel confident the county will cooperate with us."

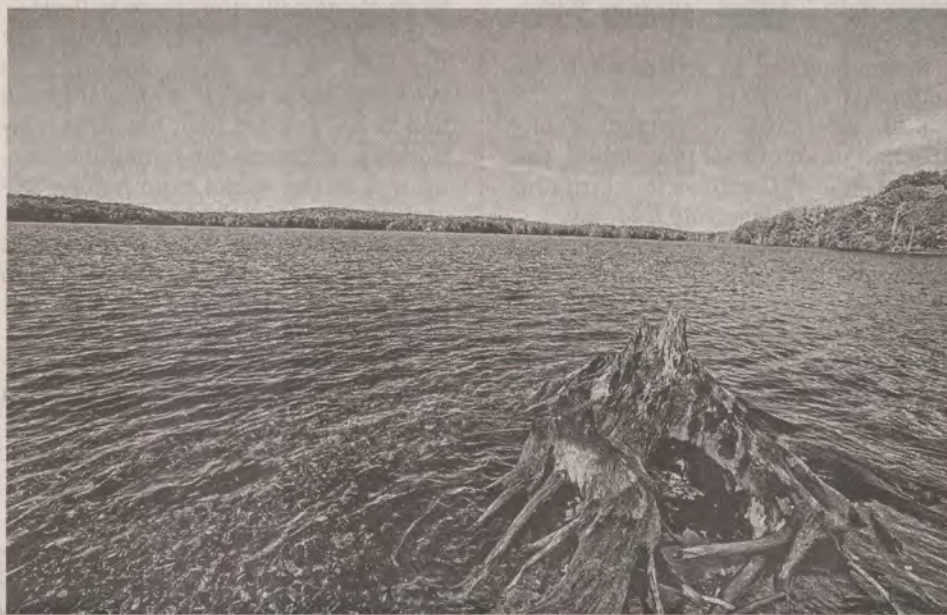
The federal Safe Drinking Water Act allows fines of up to \$62,689 a day for non-compliance. But the EPA has yet to seek those fines as it seeks compliance, a spokesman said. The state fines, which accrue at almost \$13,000 a day, are more than \$69 million, dating back to the mid-2000s. A state Health Department spokesman declined comment.

Opponents of the plant include members of the historic Quaker Friends Meeting House, which abuts the site, as well as the Coalition to Prevent Westchester Airport Expansion and the Purchase Environmental Protective Association, known as PEPA.

"It will destroy the neighborhood," said Peter Close, the clerk of trustees at the Quaker Friends Meeting House. "That construction project will go on for years. And it's a massive building that can't be hidden."

PEPA Executive Director Anne Gold wants the plant built at an alternative site, down a hill in the woods, a half-mile from Purchase Street.

"We aren't against the plant," Gold said. "Why not build it on the site that's not in the watershed?"



Westchester Joint Water Works wants to build a new water treatment facility on Purchase Street in Harrison near Rye Lake. SETH HARRISON/THE JOURNAL NEWS



Mamaroneck Mayor Tom Murphy said he fears an even greater financial impact than higher water rates if the filtration plant plan gets stalled again. JOHN MEORE/THE JOURNAL NEWS



County Executive George Latimer said Westchester is evaluating a proposed land swap after neighbors raised issues about the new filtration plant. MARK VERGARI/THE JOURNAL NEWS

State, feds also concerned

State and regional agencies also have issues with the plans for an airport plant.

Rye Lake, which is part of the New York City reservoir system, lies on the eastern side of the sprawling Kensico Reservoir. The city's Department of Environmental Protection, which is charged with protecting the vast watershed that extends from Westchester to its Catskill reservoirs, on Oct. 10 informed WJWW that its final environmental impact statement failed to adequately study the alternative site, where the plant's runoff would not drain into the reservoir.

DEP Supervisor Cynthia Garcia told WJWW that its reasons for choosing the airport location, so close to the reservoir, didn't meet the city's standards.

"Deciding to locate a project within the New York City watershed should warrant a more detailed, quantified justification," she wrote. "There does not appear to be a compelling reason why the filtration plant could not be located outside of the NYC watershed."

The state Department of Environmental Conservation wants WJWW to consider the alternative site as well, in addition to submitting a freshwater wetlands permit, noting that the current proposal would disturb a 1.7-acre buffer between the site and wetlands by the airport.

WJWW Engineer Paul Kutzy said the agency was awaiting completion of the environmental study before making the

submission on the wetlands, which will also require support from Westchester County.

Purchase Street plant

WJWW wants to build the plant on Purchase Street, just east of the Purchase Quaker meeting house.

The plant, surrounded by an 8-foot high steel fence, would be located 100 feet behind trees that line the airport site on Purchase Street. The building would be three stories high, with a gabled roof, to blend it with local homes. It would be faced with a stone veneer, not unlike the \$8 million ultraviolet treatment facility by Rye Lake that opened in January to treat the water for other microorganisms.

WJWW maintains the airport site is superior, noting that it is zoned for business purposes, as opposed to the alternative's location in a residential zone. The site is also near the WJWW's ultraviolet treatment facility and water storage tanks and is fronted by the WJWW water main.

The alternative site

You reach the alternative site along a half-mile path through the woods off Purchase Street. It's south of Million Air's private hangar complex and abuts an airport runway.

The alternative site was part of an approved 40-acre housing subdivision that was never built before the site was purchased by WJWW for the plant in the

The average WJWW water bill for (customers) would rise by 75% to \$1,650 over five years once the plant is constructed

1990s. The agency kept 13 acres for the filtration facility, and sold the remaining 27 acres to former PEPA Chairman Michael Tokarz. But the agency abandoned that plan in 2008 before adopting its final environmental study.

Reasons for the decision to abandon that plan included the half-mile of water lines that would have to be installed, the desire to protect the land's forest of oak and tulip trees, and the need to use the county's Tower Road to access the plant.

Tokarz tangled with WJWW in the mid-2000s when the agency began to clear the site. He has since changed his tune, maintaining that the Rye Lake water is more important than disruptions by his property.

In an Aug. 31 letter, he agreed to allow access to the site through his yet-to-be-built subdivision.

"I believe the site is a much better location for the water filtration plant given its hidden location, distance from the Quaker meeting house and other residences, and far superior with respect to protecting the environment," said Tokarz.

Murphy said the agency was leery.

"I am not going to risk the health, safety and welfare of 100,000 folks who consume the water, and threaten their financial stability, based on the nebulous promises of a real estate developer," he said.

Westchester swap

The linchpin of the agency's plan is the land swap. Westchester would trade the agency 13 acres of airport land in exchange for 13 acres at the alternative site.

Legislator Nancy Barr, D-Rye Brook, who represents Harrison and Purchase, did not return phone messages and emails seeking comment.

County Executive George Latimer said news of concerns by the DEC and DEP have brought new scrutiny.

"It has recently come to our attention, by the NYSDEC and NYCDEP, that there are significant concerns about locating the facility on airport property," said Latimer. "Since hearing about these concerns, the county is fully evaluating the land swap, and will discuss these issues further with our environmental partners."

Any land swap legislation must be sent to the legislature by Latimer. So far he has yet to do so.

Murphy remains confident that Latimer will back the WJWW plan.

"I'm sure that after the county does its due diligence, they will agree with us that the environmental criteria have been more than satisfied at the airport site," he said. "I'm sure the county board will eventually take action that benefits 100,000 of their residents."

Follow David McKay Wilson on Twitter @davidmckay415.