

OOPS!!! This article demonstrates how unforeseen and underestimated costs are inevitable on a large project... now think of this kind of miscalculation on a "Grande" scale... Fulltime EMS workers, ambulances, police, senior buses, etc..

Hopatcong residents vent about sewer project

By YONI SAMUEL-SIEGEL
Herald Staff Writer

HOPATCONG — Borough resident Christine Stowe was pleased with the work done on her driveway and lawn after sewers were installed.

Until contractors returned to dig up the area — undoing all of the work that had been done.

Stowe was one of a number of Hopatcong residents who expressed their concerns about the ongoing sewer project at the Borough Council meeting Wednesday night, echoing unhappiness from Hopatcong residents that has persisted from the \$40 million project's inception.

According to Stowe, her property was promptly mended after digging was done.

"They actually did a very nice

job," Stowe said of the work done on her driveway and lawn. Then, she came home from work and found her property had been torn apart. "There is no communication," she said.

This is not an isolated incident, according to her neighbor Matt Hikel. It is an example, he said after the meeting, of why the budget for paving allotted by the borough is over its initial estimate.

The \$390,992 budget for paving that the council authorized on Feb. 20, 2003, needed to be amended to \$620,678 during Wednesday night's meeting.

Mayor Richard Hodson said repaving costs for the entire project have actually exceeded the original estimate by about \$1 million because the oil and stone base under many of the borough's

paved roads breaks up easily, meaning more blacktop is needed to patch the work area than expected.

"We are getting clobbered," he said of the additional cost.

Adding to the frustration, says Hikel, homeowners are finding their driveways mended in a patchwork fashion. This was the case with Stowe, whose driveway was completely resurfaced less than two years ago.

"For a homeowner who may want to sell their house, that type of work is not satisfactory," said Hikel.

Both Hikel and Stowe said that they have brought these concerns to Borough administrator Steven Ward.

In turn, he produced a copy of the contract between the borough and Metra Industries Inc, the

company hired to work in their neighborhood.

According to the contract, all property must be "restored to a condition at least equivalent to the conditions" prior to the work being done. While Hikel is quick to point out that Ward is doing an excellent job, he does not find the words of the contract being met.

Ward could not be reached for comment on Thursday. Hodson said the borough has received about 200 inquiries about damage and restoration, including damage to vehicles, fences and at least one foundation.

Another issue that is still on the minds of Hopatcong homeowners is the ominous bottom line. The ultimate cost to the homeowner was a contributing factor in the defeat of the original referendum asking whether the borough

should take on the sewer project.

Hikel and Stowe worry that Hopatcong's unique geological makeup will drive the cost to each homeowner past what can be considered reasonable.

"There is only about six inches of dirt on our lawns," said Hikel. "Under that is solid rock."

With all homeowners expected to bear the cost of connecting their homes to the main sewer line, Hikel fears that the cost of blasting through all of that rock will be more than some can handle.

Borough resident Gail Tortorella agrees. "Hopatcong is not a wealthy town," she said. "We have a lot of senior citizens and a lot of people on a fixed income."

Hodson said the borough will review the connection concerns.