

LSWC PLANNING A STRATEGY FOR THE FUTURE

Thor Jourgensen | March 18, 2019

LYNN — The Lynn Water & Sewer Commission (LWSC) stands at a crossroads as it maps out a new 20-year operating contract to modernize the aging sewage treatment plant while keeping ratepayers happy.

Opened in 1985 and upgraded in 1990, the plant can't be seen from the Lynnway but it can be smelled, according to drivers and city councilors, although LWSC officials say the nose-offending odor can't always be blamed on the plant.

"We spend so much money on odor control and we've got several awards, including a 2011 Massachusetts Water Pollution Control Association Inc. award," said plant Director of Operations Robert J. Tina.

LWSC under Tina's supervision oversees the treatment plant, but it is operated by 34 union employees who work for Veolia, a global engineering company that secured the 20-year contract in 1991.

The brainchild of former Mayor Patrick J. McManus, the contract is designed to provide LWSC with predictable operating costs and assure Veolia a steady income stream.

The annual payment to operate the plant is tied to the consumer price index (CPI) and has stayed under \$6 million for most of the contract's life except in the last several years when it climbed to \$6 million annually as the CPI rose.

But LWSC Executive Director Daniel O'Neill said future operating costs are a significant concern as work begins on preparing to draft a new, 20-year contract.

Only a handful of firms operate big-scale treatment plants including France-based

Veolia and Suez Environment and CH2 Hill OMI based in Denver.

O'Neill said these companies may look at the current Lynn contract and decide adjustments need to be made to wage, benefits and the all-important "full risk stipulation" in the contract, potentially resulting in a 30 percent increase in annual costs to LWSC.

"We're expecting a significant increase. Hopefully, competition will keep that down," he said. "Full risk" is the name for the \$500,000 Veolia receives annually as part of its plant operation payment to cover repairs and equipment replacement at the plant. If maintenance costs in a year exceed that amount, Veolia covers the cost.

"It's been a very good contract for us. Veolia is responsible for everything," Tina said.

Maintenance and equipment upgrades are a major concern in a facility that operates around the clock, every day of the week, turning 22 million gallons of raw sewage a day from Lynn, Nahant, Saugus and Swampscott into treated and sanitized water effluent deemed clean enough by federal standards to dump into the ocean.

Ash left over from the incineration of solids isolated in the treatment process are buried in the plant's on-site ash landfill. The plant's other features include giant chlorine tanks, emergency generators the size of large trucks, and a 3 mile-long underwater pipe sticking out into the ocean.

With an eye on future Lynnway development, Tina said the new contract may be drafted to make the plant's landfill the backup location for ash and require the contract holder to truck ash to an off-site land. That reversal of



Lynn Water & Sewer Commission plant Director of Operations Robert Tina stands in his favorite room of the facility, the "Cave Room." (Spenser R. Hasak)

the current ash disposal method could extend the landfill's lifespan beyond the current maximum 20-year estimate, Tina said.

One long-time marine environment advocate calls the last years of the treatment plant contract a perfect opportunity to modernize the plant and bolster future environmental protection.

"The first and most important thing is that the plant is modernized," said Bruce Berman, strategy and communications director for Save the Harbor/Save the Bay.

"I think Water & Sewer, the city of Lynn and the public should expect the plant to use the most economical and effective technology," Berman added.

He said LWSC was "ahead of the curve" when the \$118 million plant was built 34 years ago but it needs additional upgrades, including state-of-the-art odor control.

O'Neill said an independent audit set to be completed in the fall will determine additional upgrade work needed at the plant before the detailed process of drawing up contract specifications and advertising bids begins.

"We need to see what needs to be done on Veolia's side and what LWSC has to budget for," O'Neill said.