

Proposed sewage facility criticized

Trustees say plan is in best interests of Prairie Township

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Prairie Township trustees are taking steps toward building a sewage-treatment plant on a tributary of Big Darby Creek even as they work with other governments to protect the creek from pollution.

Environmentalists are concerned that Trustees Teresa Keller and Joe Wharton approved an agreement with a water and sewer company and signed off on an appraisal of land near the Hellbranch Run, where the plant could be built.

Discharge of treated sewage from the plant could harm the creek, they say.

"This couldn't be more poorly timed," said John Tetzloff, of the Darby Creek Association.

Prairie Township and nine other governments, including Franklin County and Columbus, signed an accord and hired consultants in the past few weeks. They pledged to work together to protect the Darby, a state and national scenic waterway.

Wharton says he wants to keep options open to protect township land from being annexed to Columbus.

As part of the accord, Columbus has agreed in principle to offer water and sewer services to jurisdictions in the watershed without annexing the land, Tetzloff said.

Douglas Stormont, the third Prairie Township trustee, is against the plant and says the township should yield to the accord.

"We ought to let that run its course before we take an alternative course like this," Stormont said. "I also have issues with the location."

The plant could be built on 96 acres off O'Harra Road. This month, Keller and Wharton voted to have the land appraised. It is near Hellbranch Run, which connects to the Darby. The trustees also granted exclusive rights to Ohio American Water Co. to provide water and sewer service in the area.

Wharton said a plant probably wouldn't be built if Columbus extends water and sewer lines. But he wants to put the process for a plant in motion, just in case.

"It's putting control of the township's destiny in the township's hands," Wharton said. "If we have our own water and sewer, there's no need for annexations."

He said he would favor a small plant that handles 3 million gallons a day.

"It'll have the tightest environmental standards of any plant in Ohio," Wharton said.

Meanwhile, resident Steve Kennedy, who is considering a run for trustee this year, is circulating a referendum petition to undo the contract with Ohio American Water. He said he is close to having the 363 signatures he needs to get the issue on the November ballot.

Although some homes in Prairie Township still use wells and septic tanks, most residents have water and sewer service through Franklin County, which has arranged hookups with Columbus.



"Being able to provide water and sewer won't stop Columbus from annexing," Kennedy said. He said developers still would be attracted to the city because it could offer more reasonable rates and allow them to build more homes per acre.

Others in the Darby accord criticized the idea of a sewage treatment plant. "It's premature for them to be doing this at this time," Pleasant Township Trustee Keith Goldhardt said.

Dan Dudley, of the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency's Division of Surface Water, said the plant could not be approved today because of a state moratorium on sewer connections in western Franklin County. The moratorium will not be lifted until after his office revises a plan required by federal law to set standards for how water and sewer services should be managed in the area.

Tetzloff said that would only temporarily stop the township.

"They could possibly build the plant but just not hook it up" until the moratorium ends, he said.

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