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Sewer committee delays decision on Cornell vet waste

Member questions handling of activist's concerns

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The decision about whether the Ithaca wastewater treatment plant should accept digested animal carcass waste from Cornell University has been put off for another month.

At a Wednesday afternoon meeting, the multi-municipality committee that oversees the publicly owned plant agreed to delay a vote until its next session, July 14, because two of its members -- Ithaca mayor Carolyn Peterson and Ithaca Town Board member Pat Leary -- were unable to attend.

Ithaca Town Board member Rich DePaulo asked that plant operators also provide the committee with a proposed waste sampling schedule or draft permit ahead of that meeting.

And he expressed concern with the way committee chairman Wade Wykstra had handled a letter submitted by Ithaca environmental activist Walter Hang.

In the letter and at a previous meeting, Hang urged against taking the waste, arguing that more stringent, independent testing was necessary. He also called for the recusal of plant operator Dan Ramer because of what Hang considered to be a biased statement made by Ramer regarding the current disposal of the waste in Watertown.

Wykstra asked that staff address Hang's technical points, which they did, in a comprehensive five-page response made available just hours before the meeting.

But he also circulated his own letter to the committee and staff, saying Hang's submission "exceeds the maximum allowable limits for irony and suspension of disbelief."

Wykstra questioned Hang's intentions as an environmental consultant, noted that he did not show the professional courtesy to come to the plant and question its staff prior to making his claims, and suggested that staff time no longer be expended on responding to them.

DePaulo said he felt it was a borderline personal attack and not a good example of how a participatory government should respond to citizens.

Hang, who was present at Wednesday's meeting, also expressed dismay at the way he was treated. He insisted his intentions were pure and that he only wanted to raise legitimate environmental concerns before it was too late.

Committee members said they needed more time to review the staff response to the points Hang had raised.

They also learned that a comprehensive study conducted by Penfield-based consultants MRB Group has created a "pretty significant" cost overrun. What was initially meant to cost \$13,000 may now be as much as \$20,000 due to additional staff time accrued while responding to concerns that emerged and required further investigation, city environmental engineer Scott Gibson told committee members.

