

The war over water

Poland Spring to voters: Dump moratorium

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By Tammy Wells

SHAPLEIGH — Poland Spring is urging Shapleigh residents to vote down a proposed moratorium Sept. 20 that would prohibit testing by the company on town-owned land on Mann Road. The company, in a prepared statement, said it believes a moratorium isn't needed because it will be at least a year before any application for water extraction is submitted to the town.

A second question voters will decide that day would allow testing.

"The people of Shapleigh are already in control of this process," said Mark Dubois, the natural resources manager for the company who is heading-up the Shapleigh project. "Our initial testing this fall could lead to a preliminary yes or no decision on this site before winter. For additional work to take place beyond these simple tests, another people's vote at March Town meeting would be needed to approve any contract with Poland Spring – this project is not going anywhere fast if we are allowed to test this fall."

However, a representative of a group that initiated the citizen-petition that led to the moratorium question said she believes residents should favor the moratorium.

Shapleigh resident Mary Taylor said this morning that she firmly believes the moratorium is needed. Taylor is a member of Protecting Our Water and Wildlife Resources (POWWR), a group formed as Shapleigh residents learned that Poland Spring was looking at extracting water from an aquifer on town-owned land on Mann Road. If the water resource is found to be adequate, Poland Spring could pipe the water up the Mann Road to Route 11, where it would be trucked to the company's Hollis plant for bottling.

The Planning Board has worked on a water extraction ordinance it originally intended to present to voters Sept. 20. But there was a change of heart, and the board intends to continue to work on the document, with a view to presenting an ordinance at the annual Town Meeting in March.

Taylor said she believes the proposed ordinance in its current form is too weak and that the moratorium gives the Planning Board time to craft a more comprehensive ordinance.

"I don't trust their maneuvers," she said of Poland Spring. "I encourage (voters to approve) the moratorium. It supports our Planning Board."

Signatures of 161 residents on a petition calling for a referendum were filed with

the town-clerk earlier this year. Taylor presented the petition to selectmen.

“This is not Poland Spring,” Taylor said. “This is Nestlé. We have to look at what they’ve done across the country.”

Poland Spring is a division of Nestlé Waters North America.

Dubois said that Poland Spring does not believe a moratorium is necessary because the company has no plans to bring an application for water extraction before the Planning Board for at least a year.

“We question the need for a 180-day moratorium given the timing of any application we might submit,” said Dubois. “The real impact of the moratorium would be to delay the water resource testing and deny the town an opportunity to evaluate the potential financial benefits to the citizens of Shapleigh.”

If the moratorium fails, voters will also decide Sept. 20 if they wish to approve the testing plan by Poland Spring. The testing question includes restrictions such as a provision that Poland Spring couldn’t move forward with any plan without a further Town Meeting vote; would bear all cost of testing; and would reimburse Shapleigh for fees charged by consultants and attorneys hired by the town.

Poland Spring would have to share results of their testing with the town, and wouldn’t be allowed to do any work other than the testing without Town Meeting approval.

“The vote on September 20th is only an initial step that would give Poland Spring the opportunity to test the water resource in order to determine if a spring water operation would be feasible for the company and beneficial to the town,” Dubois said.

“If, after a comprehensive study of the aquifer, Poland Spring believes a project is feasible, the company would then enter into negotiations with the town for a contract to withdraw water from town-owned land,” Dubois added. “Only after that contract could additional aquifer testing take place next summer in order to prepare for local and state permits.”

Dubois noted that any plan would require reviews and approvals by a number of agencies.

The Town Meeting is set to begin at 10 a.m. Sept. 20 at Shapleigh Memorial School on Route 11.

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