

Money-Loser: Wastewater ban will cost Auburn's ratepayers next year

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 **The Post-Standard Editorial Board**
By

Wow! Auburn rocks! The council sure struck a blow against hydrofracking, didn't it, when it voted July 7 to ban accepting wastewater from natural gas wells at the municipal sewage treatment plant?

Well, not exactly. Not at all, in fact.

What do you mean? It voted to stop treating the polluted wastewater from those controversial wells, right?

Uh, no. The water isn't coming from horizontal-well hydrofracking — which isn't going on in New York. It's from conventional, vertical gas wells that have been operating in Upstate New York for years.

But the Cayuga Anti-Fracking Alliance says the Auburn plant isn't equipped to handle the high salt concentrations, the radioactive agents and cancer-causing chemicals in the wastewater.

The plant employs a certified laboratory to sample effluent during both high-flow and normal-flow days. Vicky L. Murphy, director of municipal utilities, wrote last month that sampling for 33 "volatiles" (including benzene and toluene) and 13 metals detected no traces of volatiles on a normal flow day. Traces of Radium-226 and the metal barium were detected — in concentrations well below permissible state levels. High-flow testing detected three volatiles, three metals and Radium-226 — all below DEC permissible levels, Murphy said. She also noted that the Auburn plant complies with all state and federal regulations.

How can you be so confident it's safe?

Auburn has been treating the water for 10 years. The wastewater amounts to less than 1 percent of the plant's total water flow.

Then why did the council members vote for the ban?

Ask them. Some speculation: Democratic Mayor Mike Quill, a voting member, is up for re-election this year, and anti-fracking advocates have raised quite a fuss. Plus, his opponent is for the ban.

Anyway, what harm can a ban do?

Well, there's the small matter of the \$600,000 or so the city earns each year from the drillers — about one-fifth of the sanitation department's budget. City residents will have to make it up somehow.

Indeed, on Wednesday, Auburn property owners learned they will be getting an increase in sewer rates. City Manager John Rossi said the unspecified increase was included in next year's budget because of the anticipated shortfall in revenue from natural gas drillers.

@#\$%&! Can we have a do-over, please?*

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