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Wilton wants Pennichuck to run waterworks

By [David Brooks](#)
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WILTON – With century-old pipes under Main Street facing replacement next year even as new computerized pumps got turned on this week, the Wilton Water Works has a foot in the past and a foot in the future.

Balancing those two is proving harder and harder, which is why water commissioners want to contract the job out to the services arm of Pennichuck Water Works.

"We've been running the system on a part-time basis – we're not running it professionally. . . . That doesn't work anymore," Water Commissioner Tom Herlihy said Wednesday night, as the three-man commission considered hiring Pennichuck Water Service Corp. to handle most day-to-day operations. "These people specialize in this stuff; we can't."

The water system serves about a third of the population of Wilton, mostly in the downtown area.

It is run by elected members of the Wilton Water Commission, who do the work outside their regular jobs, with help from the town highway department, and have no full-time employees of its own.

In recent years, much of the daily oversight has been done by Commissioner Charlie McGettigan Jr., who is acknowledged as knowing more about the system than anybody in town. McGettigan is retired and, as several members of the audience commented Wednesday, will also want to retire from the water system one of these days.

Contracting out daily operations to Pennichuck, said Commission Chairman Jim Tuttle, will help to transition McGettigan from tasks that range from making decisions about water main breaks to chasing down overdue bill-payers.

"We're not going to have Charlie getting hit with a broom anymore, because they swear they've been down here and paid it already," said Tuttle.

The proposed move is being pushed by increased state and federal regulations and the complexity of modern equipment – "You can't just go in and push a button anymore," said Tuttle – which mean the system will have to hire a licensed technician.

That prospect led the commission to look into contracting out the work. Pennichuck, which manages more than three dozen water systems, including Hudson's, was an obvious choice, Tuttle said.

The commission is still in talks with Pennichuck but is considering a two-year contract at \$91,000 a year. The money is included in the budget approved at Town Meeting, but no contract has yet been signed. The commission is likely to vote next week on whether to enter final negotiations.

Wilton would still own the system, and the commissioners would still make all decisions, including setting rates. Commissioners said they would continue to use town employees for maintenance work as much as possible, to reduce costs.

If Pennichuck is hired, customers would see slightly different bills and a few new services, including a 24-hour helpline. The contract would not require any change in rates, the commissioners said.

Wilton Water Works, which also provides water to about 30 homes in west Milford, has a number of major capital improvement projects in the works. They include a roughly \$350,000 project for a new pipeline bringing water over the Souhegan River, which should be done this summer; replacement of undersized and very old water mains as part of Main Street renovations, at a cost of a couple of hundred thousand dollars; the possibility of creating a second line across the river, to improve circulation within the system and possibly expand the service area; and roughly \$75,000 worth of repairs to the 600,000-gallon water tank.

Wilton does not have a wastewater treatment plant. Wilton sewage is treated at Milford's plant under a long-term arrangement.

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