

Charlton's request denied for emergency beaver removal

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Posted Oct 12, 2017 at 11:29 PM Updated Oct 13, 2017 at 12:16 PM



SOUTHBRIDGE – The Board of Health denied neighboring Charlton's application for a 10-day emergency permit to trap beavers during an emotion-packed meeting Thursday night.

Board members Elizabeth Stephens and Susan Starkey voted no, while David Adams voted yes.

Incessant beaver-induced flooding on Guelphwood Road has plagued the shoulderless road that connects Charlton and Southbridge near the town line, causing its temporary closure several times each year.

The dam has been breached, and a member of the Southbridge Conservation Commission inspected the area and had not observed any beavers in recent weeks. It is highly unusual that they wouldn't return to restore the dam, Ms. Stephens said.

Because of those factors, and because the road is already closed, Ms. Stephens questioned whether this was a true emergency situation.

"I did speak to someone at (the state department of) wildlife and fisheries, and she also expressed some concern that, because the road has been closed for two years, is this really considered an emergency," Ms. Stephens said.

Mr. Adams disagreed, stating the terminology was meant to apply to a permit that's short-lived.

Ms. Starkey agreed with Ms. Stephens' suggestion that it was not an imminent threat.

Ms. Stephens also noted that trapping season runs from Nov. 1 to April 15, and she questioned why no one from Charlton had gone during regular trapping season to try and take care of the problem.

"I was told that they just don't like to trap during regular season because they have to use the other traps, and it takes more time and money," she said.

The board member also noted that issuance of an emergency permit wouldn't guarantee Charlton would be able to trap any beavers in 10 days, given that there hadn't been recent sightings. "It's a crapshoot," she said.

The outcome angered several residents of Charlton and Southbridge in the Guelphwood, Denfield and Ellis roads neighborhood.

"No faith in this board," Sophie Williams of Guelphwood Road in Southbridge said after the meeting.

"The town of Charlton has been 100 percent helpful, and this town just refuses to do anything about it," said her husband, Steve Williams.

Jimmy Falzone of Denfield Road in Charlton accused Ms. Starkey of gamesmanship by intentionally delaying the process. Ms. Starkey was not in attendance during the previous meeting, when the Southbridge board couldn't act on the matter because of a lack of a quorum.

"They're hoping we don't show up to these meetings," Mr. Falzone said.

Told of the allegation, Ms. Starkey said she couldn't attend the prior meeting because she had to attend a public health event for flu immunizations for her job.

About her decision, Ms. Starkey said, “I really was looking at the letter of the law, specifically seeing whether it met the elements of the law and definition of a true threat to public health. Since there isn’t a flood, and there aren’t beavers, they haven’t met the conditions on this particular day for us to write the permit.”

Charlton Conservation Agent Todd Girard applied to Southbridge on Sept. 19.

The beaver dam is at 26 Ellis Road in Southbridge, on the property of Southbridge Full Gospel Center, which had given Charlton access to the property for the work.

The plan called for Southbridge and Charlton to hire a beaver specialist to remove beavers in a ponded area known as Cedar Swamp on the border of the towns, according to the application.

The dam is holding five to six feet of water, the application said.