

The Southern Oswego County Regional Interceptor Sewer (“SOCRIS”) Alternative Is The Best Choice For Constantia And The Southern Oswego County Region.

SOCRIS EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Oswego County owns the former railroad bed running along the north shore of Oneida Lake from Constantia to Fulton traversing the towns of Constantia, West Monroe, Hastings, Schroepfel, Volney, and the City of Fulton. It is used as a recreation trail today. The Southern Oswego County Regional Interceptor Sewer or SOCRIS is a plan to bury a pipeline beneath the trail to carry sewage pumped from each town along the trail to the City of Fulton’s existing treatment plant. The City’s 3.4 MGD plant has excess capacity that can be sold to the towns. Because the City’s plant discharges to the Oswego River at the point where its flows are massive, it is a better place to discharge treated effluent than Oneida Lake. SOCRIS is a conceptual plan today that offers advantages to all the communities in southern Oswego County. To advance SOCRIS from a concept to a grant-eligible design, an engineering study is needed that will provide a basis for preliminary agreements between all the local governments that would benefit. The timing for the next round of grant funding to pay for SOCRIS has an application deadline at the end of July 2025. SOCRIS is the lowest cost and best alternative for everyone who wants to preserve and protect the unique character and resources of Oneida Lake.

Constantia’s North Shore Sewer Project

The Town of Constantia has been planning a major sewer project that would serve over a thousand homes, schools, and businesses located along New York State Route 49 from the Town of West Monroe line to the Village of Cleveland. It has been many years in the planning and has secured \$43 million in funding toward a goal of keeping the cost below a threshold of less than \$1,000 per home per year. There is unanimous support for protecting and preserving the precious resources provided by Oneida Lake from all the southern Oswego communities that border the lake and its tributaries. Keeping the lake a pristine source of enjoyment for the region is a principal driving factor for the sewer project.

Like any major infrastructure project, it has seen its twists and turns through pandemic-driven cost escalation and challenging political turbulence. Nevertheless, everyone wants this project to be realized at an affordable price and the sooner the better. The duly elected Town Board formed a Committee to research alternative approaches to deliver the project that would meet the challenges of the day at an affordable price and soon. We write today with a proud announcement that a better alternative has been found and to urge the entire southern Oswego County Community to support this new alternative and encourage our elected leaders on the Town and County levels to take action to make it happen now.

SOCRIS Option

What is this new and better SOCRIS option? It revolves around a unique and special legacy from our past as a community served by the New York, Ontario and Western Railroad, which ran between the Port of Oswego and northern New Jersey in the late 1800’s. The route traversed the entire north shore of Oneida Lake through the Towns of Constantia, West Monroe, Hastings,

Schroepfel, Volney, and the City of Fulton before turning north to the Port City of Oswego. Today the real estate underlying the former rail line is owned by the County of Oswego. Residents use it as a recreation trail in all four seasons. This County-owned asset is the key to the SOCRIS alternative. It provides a single right-of-way as a connective corridor between the North Shore communities and the City of Fulton.

The SOCRIS concept is a sewer main located beneath the recreation trail running from Constantia to Fulton. It would provide a connection for every Town along the way that desired to pump wastewater to the existing treatment facility owned and operated by the City of Fulton. Why is SOCRIS an interesting alternative for the southern Oswego towns and the City of Fulton? Let's look at it first from the Fulton perspective, why would this be a benefit to the City and its residents?

New Source of Revenue For Fulton

The City owns and operates an existing treatment facility with a permitted capacity of 3.4 million gallons per day or "MGD." The City's website lists its current average flow as 1.2 MGD. This indicates that city ratepayers are paying for an underutilized facility. This is likely due to the changing mix of residential and commercial users of the existing system, especially the loss of significant industrial users. The business proposition for the City is the sale of its excess capacity to financially support its treatment enterprise and stabilize future rates for its residents. Sewer user rates are based on the costs of people, power, biosolids disposal, and debt service. The key question for the City is determining what rates to charge outside users to fully cover its costs of providing the treatment services. These numbers are unknown at this moment but surely can be calculated and plugged into a formula that would determine the rates the Town's discharging to SOCRIS would pay. If these costs of services compare favorably to each Town's costs of treatment, then SOCRIS would be mutually beneficial when viewed from a financial perspective.

Other driving factors are important to consider for each Town looking at this option. Constantia residents support its sewer project for one reason above all others, the preservation and protection of Oneida Lake. This is true for everyone, not just waterfront residents but everyone has their own specific ways of engaging with the lake and all it provides whether it's fishing, boating, swimming, snowmobiling, partying in 3-Mile Bay or just enjoying spectacular views at sunrise and sunsets. Benefits of SOCRIS include no discharge of treated effluent to Oneida Lake and removal of existing septic systems that are hydraulically connected to the waters of the lake.

SOCRIS vs New Plant Construction

From the perspective of the Town government, particularly the responsibilities associated with siting, constructing, and operating a new treatment facility or an existing plant, SOCRIS would address many concerns. First, among all concerns is cost. Constantia will avoid the cost of designing and building a new treatment plant. These costs include securing the best site whether it is converting an existing town-owned parcel being utilized as a park or buying privately owned land and inexorably fighting the NIMBY-driven legal battles that are endemic to siting any new environmental facility. Constantia is the proud host of New York State's fish hatchery for

walleyes, our most prized sport fish. It is essential to the health and welfare of the fishery that the streams in and around the hatchery are not used to convey treated effluent to the lake. A discharge to Oneida Lake will require a long pipeline carrying treated effluent to a suitable mixing zone likely in the deeper sections of the lake. This is no small matter as that pipeline must traverse the upland path from the plant to the shoreline requiring either Town owned land or an easement from a private property owner. These necessities significantly limit the options for suitable sites and drive up the cost of a new plant significantly.

Second is operating and maintaining a new state-of-the-art treatment plant that discharges to Oneida Lake. Every treatment plant that discharges to waters of New York State must have a discharge permit issued by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation. The Department uses a complex set of equations to set the limits for allowable levels of pollutants in each permit. Each permit is reviewed and reissued every five years.

SOCRIS Advances Watershed Protection Plans

There is an ongoing effort led by the Central New York Regional Planning & Development Board to develop a watershed protection plan for Oneida Lake. The plan has nine elements geared toward protecting and preserving the essential elements and character of the lake. We believe that SOCRIS is consistent with the nine-element plan and would advance its primary objectives.

New Plant = New Challenges

As conditions in the lake change so do the limits. Using history as a guide, we should expect that discharge limits will ratchet down over time with a corresponding impact on the cost to treat to the new levels. It gets more expensive over time. New rules and requirements are typically accompanied by new grants to cushion the cost impact on the rates, but it is seldom enough to maintain the status quo without a bump in the sewer rates. Regulations mandate that the folks operating treatment plants obtain licenses issued by the Department and attend annual training to stay up to date. Operations is a complex set of tasks involving biological science, chemistry, higher-order mathematics as well as knowledge and skills about maintaining a vast array of electrical and mechanical equipment of a very specialized nature and keeping it all running 24/7/365. Licensed, experienced and dedicated operators are in demand. Constantia will need to find skilled and dedicated residents willing to work as operators and support them for the foreseeable future. The SOCRIS option will involve operating and maintaining an extensive collection system of pumps and pipes. However, SOCRIS does avoid the need to site, build, operate, maintain and upgrade a wastewater treatment facility serving the Town alone. Absent a SOCRIS option, all those costs and burdens must be borne by the Town ratepayers alone.

SOCRIS Embraced by Funding Agencies

Finance for whichever direction the Constantia Town Board chooses will take the form of a mix of grants, low-interest loans, and debt mechanisms, typically the issuance and sale of municipal bonds by the Town. Two State Agencies are primarily responsible for financing sewers and treatment plants, the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, and the

Environmental Facilities Corporation or EFC. Both State agencies will heavily influence which option is the best from their own unique perspective. The Department is focused on its mission to protect the environment and has already committed significant funding to Constantia and all of our neighbors to protect Oneida Lake and its fishery. EFC has provided commitments in the form of low-interest rate loans and grants intended to make the rates charged to residents affordable. In any scenario, we will have their support. However, we believe that SOCRIS will be viewed by both agencies as a better option environmentally and financially.

SOCRIS is Better Environmentally

From the environmental perspective, discharging treated effluent to the Oswego River at Fulton provides a vast assimilative capacity that any discharge to Oneida Lake does not. The Oswego River at Fulton flows at an average of 7,000 cubic feet per second. This simply means that this fast-flowing river has the capacity to assimilate or absorb all of the pollutants discharged from the City treatment plant while causing the least amount of harm to the river and especially the levels of oxygen that fish need to live. In sum, it is a better place to discharge than Oneida Lake. Given a choice of river versus lake discharge, SOCRIS is beyond compare.

SOCRIS is Better Financially

From a dollars and cents perspective, SOCRIS also shines by comparison. Constantia will avoid costs associated with designing, siting, financing, constructing, operating and maintaining a new treatment plant. These avoided costs will tally in millions of dollars. This translates to lower user costs and is our best strategy for keeping the promise of affordability for all. Our neighbors with existing treatment plant infrastructure will not reap all of these benefits and may indeed have to expend unplanned dollars to interconnect an existing system with SOCRIS. O&M costs associated with a single community system versus connecting to SOCRIS should be the focus for those boards. It is too early to know those numbers, but logic dictates that a careful examination by an astute board will provide the answer whether to connect or not.

We as a Committee are focused on developing clear alternatives that are affordable and achievable within a relatively short timeframe driven by the next deadline for submitting Constantia's application for the Department's WIIA grant program. That deadline is July 31, 2025. Many of our neighboring communities are also planning against this same application deadline. According to the programmatic rules for these competitive grants, SOCRIS must be at the very minimum embodied in a set of agreements that can be submitted with the grant applications.

Positioning SOCRIS to Maximize Grant Funding in The Next Round

What is needed to include SOCRIS as an option for the next round of funding? The key parties are the City of Fulton, whose treatment facilities would accept and treat effluent from the pipeline and the County of Oswego as the legal owner of the right of way that we now know as the recreation trail and the host of SOCRIS. We understand that for the limited purpose of grant qualification, such an agreement need not be a binding definitive final agreement, only a written expression of interest to work together towards a shared goal of developing the SOCRIS

alternative in days to come. The Town Board of Constantia has announced its willingness to take up and consider any such agreement according to its terms. We understand and acknowledge that the full details of any such definitive agreement will require time and good faith deliberations by all parties concerned and we know that those discussions must be informed by the offer of grant funding by the Department and EFC. To that end, we have reason to believe that SOCRIS will be embraced by the funding agencies as the better alternative that we know it to be.

Why now? After painstaking review and analysis, our Committee finds SOCRIS to be the best choice for our community. Better in every metric. Lower cost. Universal enthusiasm by our constituents. Better for our shared values to protect and preserve Oneida Lake and all the many benefits it brings to the environment and our community.

December 17, 2024 Update

What is needed and from whom? We need to know if SOCRIS is technically feasible and what SOCRIS will cost, at least ballpark. The Oswego County Legislature has entered into a contract with Barton & Loguidice Engineers to perform an engineering study to develop those answers. That is a critical step forward for which we are grateful to County leadership and our elected representatives.

We ask the City Council for the City of Fulton to approve the Mayor to sign a nonbinding Letter of Intent with Oswego County to develop a definitive agreement to accept and treat effluent from SOCRIS. These two actions will turn SOCRIS from a pipe dream to a reality.

Constantia and any other Town or Village that borders the recreation trail should also seek to sign a Letter of Intent with Oswego County to tie its future needs to SOCRIS. Again, these intermunicipal agreements need to be attached to the grant applications that will be submitted in the summer of 2025.

Finally, and most importantly, we collectively need to overcome whatever reticence there may be to work cooperatively with each other toward a shared goal. We can do this only if we are united and we act with all deliberate speed.

Respectfully submitted.

Constantia Sewer Committee