Ferns and Carlisle Center

Wastewater FAQs

Amy and Ben Pirri | Updated November 12, 2026

With Special Town Meeting approaching, we've brought together answers to the questions residents have asked about Ferns and the proposed Carlisle Center wastewater connection. Article 6 would fund design and permitting for shared public infrastructure. Construction would require a separate Town Meeting vote.

The questions below cover the public project, costs, treatment capacity, septic restrictions, drinking water, the history of the proposal, and the future of Ferns.

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01 / QUESTIONS 1-6

Article 6 and the public project

01 What is Article 6 asking voters to approve?

Article 6 would fund the design and permitting phase of the Carlisle Center wastewater solution. It would not authorize construction.

This phase - estimated at **$225,000** to **$300,000** - would provide the engineering, route analysis, permit applications, and bid-ready information needed before the Town considers construction. Construction would require a separate Town Meeting vote, expected in 2027.

02 Does the proposal consider the needs of the broader Town Center?

Yes. Ferns and the Gleason Public Library are the two initial connections evaluated in Phase I. The original July 22 proposal also outlined later phases for additional Center properties, including Town Hall, the Police and Fire stations, and Village Court, followed by possible private connections if the earlier phases were feasible.

The broader Center was included in the plan from the beginning. Any additional connection would depend on available capacity, engineering, regulatory approval, Town review, and agreed costs and operating terms.

03 Does this proposal expand the wastewater treatment facility?

No. Article 6 does not authorize a larger treatment plant or an increase in its permitted capacity.

It funds engineering and design for a shared collection line from Carlisle Center to the existing Banta-Davis facility. The work will also confirm available capacity and identify any related improvements needed to accept new connections. Extending a collection line is different from expanding the treatment facility itself.

04 What happens next if Article 6 passes, and who makes the decisions?

The public infrastructure effort would move from privately funded feasibility work to a Town-led initiative. The Town would oversee spending and decisions. The proposed sequence is:

- Design and engineering: Complete surveys, subsurface and environmental investigations, flow analysis, route and pumping design, and plans for the shared main and Library connection.
- Permitting: Submit the required MassDEP application and obtain applicable state and local approvals.
- Costs and funding: Prepare construction and operating estimates and pursue up to two grant applications.
- Operating terms: Establish proposed rules for capacity, connections, fees, maintenance, and ownership.
- Separate construction vote: Return to Town Meeting with the design, permits, refined costs, funding options, and proposed connection terms.
- Bidding and construction: Proceed only after construction funding is separately approved.

We hope to remain involved wherever appropriate as the Town advances that work.

05 Has a route already been selected?

No final route has been approved. The feasibility work identified possible approaches, but detailed engineering and permitting are needed before the Town can select and accurately price a final route.

06 Would this create a townwide sewer system or encourage unlimited development?

The current proposal is limited to a shared wastewater connection in Carlisle Center. It does not authorize a townwide sewer system.

The existing treatment facility has limited capacity. Large-scale development would require substantial expansion of the plant and disposal field, additional engineering and permits, and further public approval.

The Town would establish connection procedures, fees, and operating rules. Future connections would remain subject to available capacity, technical review, Town decisions, and regulatory approval.

02 / QUESTIONS 7-12

Costs and responsibilities

07 What would the Town pay for, and what would Ferns pay for?

The Town proposal concerns shared public infrastructure: engineering, permitting, and a wastewater main that could serve municipal buildings, businesses, and homes in Carlisle Center.

We are responsible for the property purchase, renovations, environmental work, water treatment, business operations, and our private wastewater connection from Ferns to the shared main. The private Ferns connection is excluded from the public project scope.

We have also committed to contributing toward shared construction costs after grants, ongoing maintenance, and applicable user charges. The final amounts and operating terms would be established through the Town's process.

We privately funded the initial feasibility study and have already invested more than **$100,000** in due diligence.

08 Why should the Town consider infrastructure that helps a private business?

The question before the Town is broader than one business. It concerns public infrastructure, the Library, groundwater protection, and the long-term vitality of Carlisle Center.

The 1995 Town Plan called for opportunities for "informal gatherings, casual meeting places, accidental encounters" in the Center. Ferns is one part of that larger community goal.

09 How much could the project cost? Is $1.4 million a settled price?

The preliminary public project estimates are:

- Design and permitting: **$225,000–$300,000**.
- Construction: **$460,000–$1.1 million**.
- Combined planning range: **$685,000–$1.4 million**, before grants and private contributions.

The upper figure is a planning scenario, not a settled project cost. Detailed engineering is needed to narrow the estimates and establish reliable construction pricing. Article 6 funds the design and permitting phase; construction would require a separate Town Meeting vote.

10 Will grants pay for the project?

The Town and project team are pursuing several possible sources of outside funding:

- The Massachusetts Rural Development Fund offers competitive grants generally ranging from **$50,000** to **$500,000** for eligible rural infrastructure projects.
- The MassWorks Infrastructure Program provides competitive public-infrastructure grants to municipalities and other eligible public entities.
- The USDA Water and Waste Disposal Program provides long-term, low-interest financing and, when funds and eligibility allow, grants combined with loans for rural wastewater infrastructure.
- The Clean Water State Revolving Fund provides affordable public financing for eligible wastewater planning and construction.

Legislative earmarks, state bond funding, and other programs may also be explored. No award is guaranteed. The engineering scope includes assistance with up to two grant applications.

A completed design and permit-ready project would make Carlisle more competitive for funding. Voters would see the available funding and updated costs before being asked to authorize construction.

11 How much are we paying for a WWTF facility that the town only uses a fraction of?

The Town's 15-year plan projects nearly **$1.4 million between 2026 and 2033** to operate, maintain, and fund equipment replacement at the Banta Davis wastewater treatment facility.

Meanwhile, the November 2026 feasibility study reports average flow equal to approximately **18% of its permitted capacity**.

Taxpayers are supporting the ongoing costs of an entire treatment facility while using less than one-fifth of its permitted capacity on average. Its existing maintenance and replacement needs remain whether Ferns connects or not.

A shared connection offers an opportunity to get more value from infrastructure we already pay for. Added operating costs would be evaluated during design, and Ferns would pay user charges and contribute its fair share toward shared infrastructure and maintenance.

12 What will it cost to process the additional wastewater at the existing plant?

The exact added cost will be determined during design, but Carlisle's records consistently show that additional regular flow could help the underutilized plant operate more efficiently:

- The 2011 Annual Town Report said additional connections could "improve the functioning of the school's waste water treatment plant."
- The 2015 Housing Production Plan reported that "it actually costs them extra to operate the treatment plant with insufficient volumes of wastewater."
- The 2020-2021 Open Space Plan said, "The plant would benefit from regular daily flows."
- The 2022 Master Plan noted that "the system already exists and is underutilized."

Carlisle already pays to operate and maintain the facility, and many of those fixed costs do not go away when it is underutilized. Adding regular flow can improve the value the Town receives from an asset it already owns, while Ferns would pay the agreed charges for its use of the system.

03 / QUESTIONS 13-16

Treatment capacity and the existing facility

13 Is there enough capacity for Ferns and the Library while protecting the schools?

The November 5 feasibility study uses a permitted capacity of 13,500 gallons per day (GPD), a school planning flow of **5,032 GPD**, Ferns' maximum design flow of **2,035 GPD**, and the Library's design flow of **224 GPD**. Together, those flows total **7,291 GPD**, leaving **6,209 GPD** below the permitted maximum.

A possible additional **1,000 GPD** for future school growth would come from that remainder, leaving **5,209 GPD** below the permitted maximum. These figures describe the margin below the permit limit; the plant's **80%** operating threshold must also be considered.

The feasibility findings support continuing to pursue the proposed connections. Protecting the school's present and future needs comes first. Final available capacity, operating requirements, and connection approvals remain subject to further engineering and MassDEP review during design and permitting.

14 Has MassDEP reviewed the feasibility findings?

Yes. MassDEP has reviewed preliminary feasibility work and provided technical comments, including guidance on design flows and calculating treatment capacity. Further engineering, review, and regulatory approvals are still required.

15 I heard a wastewater treatment plant lasts only 20 years, and Carlisle's plant is already more than 20 years old. Is that true?

No. A plant being more than 20 years old does not mean the entire facility needs to be rebuilt.

Wastewater plants are modular. Their tanks, pumps, rotating biological contactors, controls, and other parts have different service lives and can be maintained or replaced individually as needed. The Town's 2023 15-Year Plan reflects this, with different replacement schedules for different components rather than one expiration date for the whole facility.

The facility's actual condition, maintenance history, and component renewal matter more than its age alone. Weston & Sampson's October feasibility study found the proposed connection preliminarily feasible.

16 Has the plant been so underutilized that it was fed dog food?

Yes, according to the former Board of Health chair, who was quoted in The Carlisle Mosquito describing the practice.

Wastewater treatment depends on microorganisms that need a consistent supply of organic material. When flows are very low, operators may need to supplement that food source. Additional, consistent flow can benefit an underutilized facility.

04 / QUESTIONS 17-25

Ferns wastewater restrictions and alternatives

17 How did Ferns operate before, and why can't it simply reopen exactly as it was?

Ferns operated under a special septic variance dating to 1996, amended in 2010 to address its location within Zone I, a public drinking-water well protection area.

The property's approved design flow was 970 gallons per day, including the upstairs apartment. Its soil absorption system was designed for only 211 gallons per day, or **21.7%** of that approved flow.

The variance allowed that arrangement with restrictions on on-site food preparation, a composting toilet, closely monitored water use, and an emergency overflow tight tank. We cannot assume the prior variance would transfer to a new operation or be reissued under today's circumstances. Any reopening plan requires current approvals.

Those restrictions also made operating the business more difficult. Bringing Ferns back means giving it a realistic chance to succeed with a wastewater solution that supports its role as a country market and gathering place.

18 Why can't Ferns use its existing septic system or install a different one?

The existing approval is approximately 970 gallons per day for the entire property, including the apartment. A food establishment with seating is subject to a minimum wastewater design flow of 1,000 gallons per day before accounting for the apartment and other uses. Ferns' intended whole-building design flow is roughly 2,000 gallons per day.

Ferns sits on a small parcel within Zone I. MassDEP policy calls for removing septic systems from Zone I whenever possible and prohibits increasing septic design flow there. Even a system that physically fit would face those drinking-water protections.

Surrounding land is also constrained by wellhead protections. The standard Zone II nitrogen-loading limit is 440 gallons per day per acre. Four engineering teams found no approvable on-site or neighboring-land solution for the wastewater capacity the market and café requires.

19 Are you pursuing a full-service restaurant, and what does the regulatory term “restaurant” mean?

Our vision is a country market with everyday staples, counter service, takeout, and seating, much like before. We hope to prepare fresh food on site, which the previous septic variance significantly restricted.

“Restaurant” is a wastewater regulatory classification that includes different kinds of food establishments. Title 5 (310 CMR 15.203) lists 35 gallons per day per seat for “Restaurant” and 20 gallons per day per seat for “Restaurant, Fast Food.” As a MassDEP engineer explained in a Martha’s Vineyard Commission review, the fast-food rate assumes disposable customer plates, cups, and utensils. The distinction concerns what needs to be washed, rather than where customers order or how staff serve food.

We plan counter service and hope to use real plates and silverware. Either way, the minimum design flow for the café with seating is 1,000 gallons per day, before the apartment and other uses. That minimum applies even with one seat. It is not a requirement created by choosing table service or a more expansive menu.

20 Could Ferns just reopen as a smaller market without a café?

A takeout-only market with no seating could follow a different regulatory path. But that would be a different concept from what people told us they wanted in our community survey. Almost 600 people responded: 86 percent wanted a casual meeting place, 85 percent wanted counter service, and 76 percent wanted café seating.

Our vision is a market and café with counter service and seating. Once a food establishment includes even one seat, the 1,000-gallon-per-day minimum applies before accounting for the apartment and other uses. Reducing the menu or the number of seats would not change that minimum.

21 Were other wastewater options seriously considered, and why study the Banta Davis connection?

Yes. Four engineering teams evaluated conventional septic, advanced treatment systems, neighboring land, Center Park, tight tanks, composting toilets, restroom trailers, relocating the water supply, and substantially restricted operations. None produced an approvable on-site solution for the proposed market and café.

After months of exploring those alternatives, a connection to the existing Carlisle Public School wastewater treatment facility at Banta Davis emerged as the only viable remaining long-term path identified. The feasibility study indicates sufficient capacity to continue pursuing the proposed connections, subject to design, permitting, and protection of the school's needs.

22 Why couldn't you put a septic system at Center Park?

We investigated Center Park with the Town's permission, hoping to fund a solution privately.

But the approximately 0.6-acre parcel falls within Zone II wellhead protections. Under the standard nitrogen-loading limit of 440 gallons per day per acre, that allows about 264 gallons per day - well below the 1,000-GPD minimum for a food establishment with seating.

In early May, Innovative Septic Designs delivered what we call our "brick-wall phone call," explaining that neither property offered an approvable solution. Although that conversation wasn't documented in a formal report, further engineering reviews and discussions with MassDEP followed.

23 Could a holding tank allow Ferns to reopen before the permanent connection is built?

MassDEP has stated that a holding tank, also called a tight tank, is not an acceptable permanent solution. It has indicated that it is willing to evaluate a limited interim approach once the Town makes a firm, enforceable commitment to constructing the permanent wastewater connection.

That could allow restoration and reopening work to move forward while the permanent connection is designed and built. The interim operating plan would still require regulatory and Town review.

There is no confirmed reopening date. Engineering, permits, funding, Town decisions, and the remaining environmental work must advance before a reliable date can be announced. Article 6 authorizes design and permitting; construction still requires a separate vote.

24 Has MassDEP prevented Ferns from reopening?

Not really. The wastewater limitations are longstanding, and MassDEP's responsibility is to determine whether a proposal protects public health and complies with state requirements.

MassDEP has been working collaboratively with the project team to explain the permitting path and evaluate potential interim and permanent solutions.

25 Is there enough parking for the proposed seating?

Parking has been part of the planning from the beginning. The 49-seat scenario in the feasibility study was developed with available parking in mind. The final seating count and layout will meet Carlisle’s parking and permitting requirements, including spaces for market customers and employees.

05 / QUESTIONS 26-30

Drinking water and groundwater protection

26 What other issues does Ferns have?

Ferns also has several known site and drinking-water issues:

- A previous fuel release left contaminated soil and groundwater that require continued monitoring and remediation.
- The well has had PFAS detections above state guidelines, along with past coliform and E. coli detections.
- The existing well has limited yield and can run dry during use.
- Permanent disinfection upgrades approved for prior operators were never completed.

We are planning to drill a deeper well and install robust water treatment and disinfection. Environmental professionals will continue the soil and groundwater work. Each of these issues has an on-site engineering or remediation path.

Wastewater is the only major issue that cannot be solved on the Ferns property or on neighboring land.

27 Have there been drinking-water warnings in Carlisle Center?

Yes. MassDEP issued a Do Not Drink order for Gleason Public Library in May 2026 after elevated nitrate results of 12.5 and 12.0 milligrams per liter, above the 10 mg/L drinking-water standard. Town Hall has also faced a boil-water order following bacterial detections, and Ferns had a previous boil-water order.

28 If the Library passed its Title 5 inspection, why consider a wastewater connection?

Passing a Title 5 inspection means the system did not meet the inspection's failure criteria. It does not certify that the system removes nitrogen or has no effect on groundwater.

A shared wastewater connection would move the Library's wastewater disposal off site. Its potential benefits should be evaluated through the engineering and permitting process.

29 Why consider a wastewater connection in a drinking-water protection area?

Individual septic systems discharge wastewater into the ground, where nutrients and contaminants may reach drinking-water supplies. A shared connection would convey wastewater to the existing treatment facility instead of continuing disposal on the individual properties in sensitive wellhead protection areas.

MassDEP's Zone I policy favors removing existing septic systems when feasible. The proposed connection would still require engineering and regulatory review; it should not be presented as a guaranteed solution to every drinking-water issue in the Center.

30 If nearby towns also rely heavily on septic systems, why is wastewater such an issue in Carlisle?

Recent Mosquito coverage compared Carlisle with Westford, Concord, Sudbury, Wayland, and Groton, but left out an important difference: each of those communities has a public water system. Carlisle has no public water distribution system and relies on private drinking-water wells.

Septic systems are not inherently unsafe. The concern is the combination of wastewater disposal and nearby drinking-water wells in the same groundwater environment - especially when wells and septic systems are close together, as they are in the Center. That is why wastewater treatment and groundwater protection are such important local issues.

06 / QUESTIONS 31-33

The history and the public process

31 How long has Carlisle been discussing wastewater and groundwater issues in the Center?

For decades. The 1995 Town Plan stated that “disposal of waste water necessarily impacts upon the quality of groundwater.”

In 2008, the Board of Health explored state financing for a wastewater extension into Carlisle Center. The Town revisited the idea in 2010. The present proposal builds on that history using updated engineering, current operating information, and today’s regulatory requirements.

32 When did you first present this proposal to the Town?

Initial conversations with Town officials began in March 2026 to discuss using Center Park or the police station’s septic system.

Once those options were ruled out, we proposed a connection to the existing wastewater treatment facility at the Board of Health’s May 27 meeting, where we were told “this would never happen in our lifetime.”

The discussion was tabled until we pursued our own feasibility study in July. We then formally presented the proposal to the Select Board on August 11, 2026.

33 Is the Harvard General Store project proof that this will work here?

Harvard provides a useful Massachusetts precedent. Town-owned wastewater infrastructure connected its village center to an existing school facility and helped enable the Harvard General Store's café.

It demonstrates that a similar approach can work in a Massachusetts town, although Carlisle must still complete its own engineering, permitting, and public approval process.

07 / QUESTIONS 34-39

The future of Ferns

34 Why is this marketed as ‘Save Ferns’ when it really seems to be about Carlisle Center?

We use “Save Ferns” because Ferns is recognizable. It’s a place people love, remember, and want back. But this effort has become about something much bigger than reopening one business.

Ferns has been the catalyst for solving this longstanding issue, but Carlisle Center is why it matters.

35 Have you purchased Ferns?

Not yet. We have a signed purchase option for the property and are still conducting due diligence. We can walk away at any point, but we hope to move forward with the purchase once there is a commitment to a wastewater solution.

36 If the challenges are so significant, why are you still pursuing Ferns?

Because we believe the community deserves to have Ferns reopened. If this were simply a financial decision, we would not still be here.

We have invested significant time and resources in engineering, environmental investigation, and planning because we believe Ferns is an important part of Carlisle. We feel a responsibility to explore every realistic path before giving up.

The environmental investigation has also been encouraging. Groundwater petroleum concentrations have generally declined over time, indoor-air testing found no solvents or degreasers, and the detected compounds were well below applicable health-based thresholds. While additional work remains, those results give us confidence that the property's environmental challenges can be responsibly addressed.

As long as there is a potential path forward, we believe it is worth continuing to pursue the opportunity to restore Ferns for future generations.

37 What happens if Ferns fails as a business?

No business can guarantee its future. Our goal is to give Ferns a realistic chance to succeed by resolving the wastewater restrictions, food-preparation limits, and compliance burdens that constrained the previous operation.

Residents have expressed a strong desire for a place to pick up essentials, grab coffee, and sit with a friend. That is the role we hope to restore.

Regardless of who operates Ferns, shared public infrastructure would remain a Town asset that could serve other eligible Center properties, subject to capacity, approvals, and connection terms.

38 Could Ferns become something else?

Yes. Carlisle Center's zoning allows other uses, and a future owner could pursue a different use with lower wastewater needs.

We don't want that to happen. That's why we're doing everything we can to bring back the Ferns people remember.

39 Were you behind the Boston Globe article?

We did not solicit the article. A Boston Globe reporter who had been following our newsletters replied to our August 21 update. We expected the story to focus more on the challenges facing Ferns, including the building's history, the fuel leak, and the environmental cleanup. We participated in the interview, but the article's framing and conclusions were the Globe's own.

08 / QUESTIONS 40-41

Town Meeting and community participation

40 Does Article 6 have support from Town boards and committees?

As reported on the Ferns website as of November 12, Article 6 has unanimous support from the Council on Aging and Human Services Board, Gleason Public Library Trustees, Planning Board, and Conservation Commission, along with majority support from the Finance Committee and Select Board.

The Board of Health voted 4-0, with one member absent, not to support Article 6 on November 5.

41 What should I know about Town Meeting?

Special Town Meeting is Monday, November 16, 2026, at 6 p.m. in the Jeremy Behrle Auditorium (formerly Corey Auditorium) and cafeteria at Carlisle Public School, 83 School Street. Please check in when you arrive. Plan to attend in person to vote; watching the livestream does not provide a vote.

The articles will be taken out of numerical order: Article 6 will follow Article 7 and will be the last article considered. The Select Board will present Article 6.

Children are welcome. Those who can sit reasonably quietly may join you in the main auditorium, and middle and high school students are encouraged to see local democracy in action.

Families with younger children may participate from the cafeteria, which has an audio and video feed, a microphone, and an Assistant Moderator. Childcare assistance will also be available there to help families attend and participate.

For questions or accommodation requests, contact the Town Clerk at townclerk@carlislema.gov or 978-369-6155. The Town’s meeting page has the official documents and updates.

SOURCE DIRECTORY

Documents and further information

Engineering reports, agency correspondence, and historical records are available through the Ferns document collection. The Town's page provides official meeting materials and updates.

Ferns FAQs

Ferns document collection

Official Special Town Meeting information

Title 5 (310 CMR 15.203)

1995 Carlisle Study Plan

Carlisle Schools WWTF 15-Year Plan (2023; schedule on page 7)