

Columbia land dispute may displace boaters

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Part of a popular waterfront property in Columbia Borough is the target of an eminent domain filing that may force Susquehanna River boaters to relocate.

The portion of the 12-acre property used for watercraft access is sought by Columbia Municipal Authority, Mayor Leo Lutz said Feb. 14.

The portion under 33 cottages will not be affected by the lawsuit, the mayor said.

The property owner, Safe Harbor Water Power Corp., has offered to give it to the borough, according to newspaper records.

Borough council has held discussions about options for ownership including leasing or selling it to the cottage owners. Continuing to lease the property is unexpected because it could lead to the borough taking on liability for maintenance and infrastructure issues, according to newspaper records.

Safe Harbor has leased

the land to the cottage owners for more than 50 years, a representative of Columbia Heritage River Cottage Association told council members last July.

Lutz said the borough has filed an objection to the municipal authority's plan to take land for expansion of the water treatment plant.

However, he said, "If the water company decides to move forward, boat clubs will have to vacate the property. They can even build during litigation. Basically, it's a done deal unless (authority officials) back out."

The mayor said the borough presented several options to the water company before the lawsuit.

In an effort to limit the number of boat clubs being displaced, the borough offered to sell just enough of the parcel to meet the authority's expansion needs.

Another offer was to acquire land and a private access road from Norfolk Southern Railroad, which adjoins the water company's property,

but is not riverfront.

Mike Lewis, authority general manager, said by phone Feb. 15 that the only option for expansion is into the parcel where the boat clubs sit.

"The borough's suggestion to expand into the space next to the railroad wasn't a viable option," he said, "because (Norfolk Southern Railroad) is active and has multiple tracks."

He said the expansion was necessary to meet regulatory requirements and the growing needs of the authority's borough and township water customers.

Lutz said by phone Feb. 15 that the borough will suffer in three ways. It will lose income it would have gained from sale of the property to the boat clubs, the boat clubs will be uprooted and water customers will have to absorb legal fees of the authority.

"From a business standpoint, it's easy and it's clean to expand (the water treatment plant). But at some point you have to consider the impact to the community," he said.