

## **Proposed water contract nixed**

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By **ROBYN BURNHAM** Staff Writer

KENNEBUNK — After six weeks of listening to questions and concerns of customers, the Kennebunk, Kennebunkport and Wells Water District trustees voted unanimously to table any further action on the proposed contract to sell spring water to Poland Spring on Thursday.

“I think at the present time we have a very valuable commodity, and we should hold onto it,” said trustee Thomas Oliver.

Superintendent Norm Labbe recommended the board table any further action on the contract. He said he heard many points of view from customers, but decided not enough communication went on in the beginning.

“To indefinitely table is to stop the process at this point,” Labbe said on Thursday. “I’m still investigating the concepts of managing this water resource.”

Labbe said he has hired a third party consultant to do a geological study of the Branch Brook aquifer. Although the current contract will not be acted on, Labbe said working with Poland Spring or another bottler in the future is not out of the question.

“I have to look at all the alternatives to get additional revenues – it’s my job,” Labbe said. “If after all the studies we find it’s not worth doing, we won’t.”

The 30-year contract would have allowed Poland Spring to extract up to 432,000 gallons of water a day at a cost of double the current bulk rate for large commercial customers. The district would hold the permits and Poland Spring would be responsible for all capital expenses.

“I hope this can be revived,” said Tom Brennan of Poland Spring on Friday. “But I need to follow the district’s lead on this.”

Brennan said Poland Spring has not discussed any further pursuit of the project. He said he was happy to find out Labbe would meet with the newly-formed Save Our Water group and would also speak with residents himself if they were interested.

Kennebunk resident co-chairman of Save Our Water Bob Walter is pleased with the outcome of Thursday’s meeting, but said their work is not done.

“Save Our Water is going to continue efforts in the area by pursuing the implementation of some water extraction ordinances in Wells and Kennebunk,” Walter said on Friday. “Nestle is not going to stop pursuing this – there’s too

much money involved.”

Save Our Water members are working to prepare a public referendum in Kennebunk for the November ballot. The group will also meet with Labbe in August to discuss ways to increase revenues for the district that would not require selling ground water, Walter said.

Save Our Water received support from Corporate Accountability International and representatives from their Think Outside the Bottle campaign on Thursday.

“The Think Outside the Bottle campaign has been helping people expose the impacts of the bottled water industry,” said Sara Joseph an organizer with the Boston-based group Thursday. “One of the core campaigns has been to stop corporations like Nestle from obstructing the local democratic process.”

After all the hype, Labbe said he has learned from the experience. He just hopes the customers have not lost confidence in the district staff, and will continue working to improve service and savings, he said.