

# Rawlins replacing meter reader with technology

By John Feely

[jfeely@rawlinstimes.com](mailto:jfeely@rawlinstimes.com)

Published: Wednesday, February 1, 2012 2:06 AM MST



(Rawlins Daily Times, John Feely) Rawlins meter reader Becky Strand checks her equipment Tuesday while co-workers install a radio read transmitter on the water meter at the Victory Baptist Church on West Cedar Street.

Dogs in town are going to be upset they won't have a meter reader to chase.

New high-tech radio reader transmitters are replacing the friendly water meter reader in the city of Rawlins.

Public Works Department personnel have installed 807 of the new units as of Monday and still have 3,860 to go, said Adolf Bernal, Utilities Department supervisor.

"The process initially started off slow and we have been doing it for several months," Bernal said. "We wanted to get it done before winter arrived. But we've got to break away workers from other tasks to do it."

Workers in the Utilities Department started the switch over to the radio readers in the Highland Hills neighborhood. Bernal's staff is now cross-training some workers in the Street Department to quicken the process.

"It usually takes two people to install the MXU units," Bernal said. "They have to get the current read on the meter, the building's address if they can get it, the bar code from the MXU unit to enter into the system and the registration ID from the water meter. When installing, we use the command link to get the

longitude and latitude coordinates of where each of the meters are located."

Five workers were installing the new radio read devices on water meters in the business district along Cedar Street Tuesday. Three of the workers are with the Utilities Department and two are from the Street Department.

The workers hope to complete their tasks in the downtown business district and along West Spruce Street before the next billing period, Bernal said. If there are no major obstacles around the water meters or damage to the meters, then it takes about five minutes to install the new transmitters, Bernal added.

"The benefit for the city and the water customers is that the city is going to save money," Bernal said. "We are not going to have to send somebody out there to read all the meters. Once all of the radio readers have been installed, we will be able to get a reading from every meter in town in three to five hours."

Former meter reader Becky Strand used to take three weeks out of every month to walk around and read every water meter in town. Other city employees were pulled from other tasks to complete the meter reading prior to the next billing period, if necessary, Bernal said.

"I had to get the route done in three weeks," said Strand, who had been the city's meter reader for 11 years. "I'm going to miss the job. You don't have to go to the recreation center after work to get some exercise in. I also like being outdoors and moving around. I've never done well sitting behind a desk."

The new technology has already changed Strand's job status, Bernal said. She has gone from a part-time meter reader to a full-time municipal service worker.

Strand will continue to walk her route and read the meters in the old-fashioned, late 20th century way

until all of the new transmitters are installed. Strand is also a member of the installation crew.

Bernal and his staff tried out the new transmitting system when they completed the installation in Highland Hills. Sitting in a city vehicle in the neighborhood, they turned on the VGB computer system and a laptop computer. They got readings from all the water meters in about 20 minutes," Bernal said.

"You turn the black box (VGB system) on and a giant map of the city appears on the laptop," said John Moosman, a utility department worker. "Green dots light up on the map to identify where the water meters are located. When you drive by the meters the lights gradually go out. It's awesome to watch."

When the VGB computer system is turned on it can receive radio waves from the MXU units at the water meters. The system sends the information to the laptop computer.

The city has started an advertising campaign to dispel residents' health concerns with the new devices.

The radio transmitters operate on a low frequency that is less than home computers, cell phones and microwave ovens, said the city's campaign. The campaign states the devices transmit for only a second to send the readings to the VBG system, and usually only once a month.

When all of the transmitters have been installed on the water meters, a city employee will drive down designated streets to get readings from all of them.

"Instead of one person taking 23 days, it will take one person four hours," said Dan Izzo, city finance director.