

Beleaguered homeowners get set for water, sewer project



Rock Springs resident Becky Kelley checks a ground monitor installed by state officials on the retaining wall at her Ash Street home. Cracks in the driveway appeared after a subsidence project last summer damaged some homes in the neighborhood, which is scheduled for a major water/sewer renovation project this summer. Photo by Jeff Gearino, Star-Tribune.

By JEFF GEARINO

Southwest Wyoming bureau

Wednesday, June 25, 2008 7:06 AM MDT

ROCK SPRINGS -- A downtown neighborhood beset by damage from a controversial ground-pounding subsidence project last summer will now have to grapple with a water/sewer project that begins this week.

Which probably isn't a good idea right now, some residents say.

With subsidence problems still racking some parts of the neighborhood and the state still trying figure out what's happening in the old underground mine voids through investigative drilling, residents said during a town meeting Monday night that they were wary of beginning another digging project in the city section known as the "tree street" area.

"This doesn't seem like a very wise move to me," Geannie Berg, a homeowner on Maple Street, told city officials.

Berg's house, along with some other homes in the tree street neighborhood, suffered damage last summer from a Wyoming Abandoned Mine Lands Division subsidence project. Homeowners are still waiting for the damage to be repaired as state officials review damage claims.

City contractors said work is beginning on Maple, Ash and Cedar streets as part of a larger project that aims to replace ailing water and sewer lines around the city.

The same three streets were affected last July by the controversial AML subsidence project that was spurred by the city's long search for affordable housing.

The project's goal was to make vacant land more stable and suitable for much-needed new home development by employing a new method to collapse underground mine voids known as "dynamic compaction." The process involved repeatedly dropping 25-ton weights over the undermined areas to cave in the mine voids.

As part of the "Big Drop" project, a 61-acre lot known as Tract H located along Blair Avenue and the city's Belt Loop was selected for the first part of a \$2.4 million pilot project. The site sits next to Ash, Maple and Cedar streets.

The project was suspended in late July 2007, however, after tree street residents complained that vibrations from the pounding were damaging their homes. AML officials promised to pay for any damage to homes resulting from the dynamic compaction part of the project.

AML officials said last week that 19 tree street homeowners have submitted damage claims to the agency. Third-party

engineers are now inspecting homes and reviewing damage claims with homeowners, who will be paid through the division's insurance program, which has a \$150,000 limit per household.

The newest water/sewer project is scheduled to be completed by August 2009 and will be conducted in five phases, project manager Gene Legerski with Choice Engineering Services Inc. said.

The project -- which calls for replacing aging water and sewer lines, manholes and covers, connections and fire hydrants, among other work -- will cover an area that runs roughly from the Catholic School on Third Street all the way down to D Street, according to plans.

The new and renovated water/sewer lines would tie into other water/sewer lines that were upgraded as part of a separate AML subsidence project a few years back, "basically improving and finishing the whole thing," Legerski said.

Upgrades to the tree street area will begin this week as part of the project's first phase, Legerski said. The tree street project is expected to run six or more weeks.

There are 28 homes on the three streets that will be affected by the project. Contractors said those homes will be hooked up to temporary water lines during the construction. Streets, for the most part, will remain open to local traffic.

More problems

The project comes at the same time the AML Division is resuming investigative drilling in the tree street area to gain a better understanding of what's happening underground. AML officials said the information will help the agency determine what remediation work still needs to be done in the area.

But Ash Street resident Donna Maynard and other neighbors worried the project could cause more subsidence-related problems in the area.

Maynard discovered a 2-foot-wide, 10-foot-deep hole in her backyard in early June she contends was caused by the subsidence project, but AML officials said the subsidence hole could have been caused by heavy rains.

"It just keeps growing ... it's about double in size now and is on both sides of (her backyard) fence," she said. "Now I'm worried about this new project. Where will it end?"

Berg urged city officials to let the AML Division complete its investigative drilling program in the tree street area before beginning any new water/sewer renovation project.

"I hope you'll take into consideration ... before somebody starts digging out the earth ... that the AML doesn't even really know what's going on under there," Berg said. "Somebody should think about that."

Legerski said city plans had originally called for the tree street construction phase to be completed last, but AML officials asked that it be completed first.

"The AML came to us and said they wanted us to not be in the same area at the same time ... We're just following (the state's) request," he said.

City engineer Paul Kauchich told residents that utilities have not been affected by any past AML subsidence work. He said the city didn't anticipate any problems with the AML exploratory project. Officials also noted that the trenches holding the water/sewer lines are typically only dug 6 to 8 feet deep.

Southwest Wyoming bureau reporter Jeff Gearino can be reached at 307-875-5359 or at gearino@tribcsp.com.