

Dealing with development

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GREEN RIVER -- The old clay-tile water and sewer lines that serve tiny Reliance near Rock Springs were installed in the 1950s. Part of the line occasionally caves in, and water/sewer district officials say any more growth could overload the system with disastrous results.

Down the road, the neighboring 10-Mile Water/Sewer District that serves the area just north of Rock Springs is running at full capacity. There's no central district office, however, and the district -- spare parts and all -- is run out of board members' homes.

Over at the Westside Water/Sewer District near Blairtown in Rock Springs, operators and board members are being lost to higher-paying jobs in the energy fields. Officials say the district is in desperate need of volunteers.

Each district has its own unique concerns. But they all face the same problem: how to handle the rapid growth and increasing development that has come with southwest Wyoming's energy boom.

Sweetwater County Planner Mark Kot said county planners have been meeting with various water/sewer and improvement districts and the cities of Rock Springs and Green River to develop "strategies to begin collectively addressing" looming water and sewer issues.

Kot told county commissioners during a meeting last week that nearly every community in Sweetwater County is planning for growth.

Commissioners last year adopted a county growth management plan that outlined locations for future expansion, including the lucrative areas north and east of Rock Springs and south of Green River.

"The cities have been infilling (with development) ... and now the available land in the county is slowly infilling as well," Kot said.

He noted there are eight new subdivisions north of Rock Springs that are actively under development and another four or five under construction in areas outside the city.

"North of Rock Springs especially has been a hotbed of development ... and with development comes the need for infrastructure," Kot said.

There are five water/sewer districts in the county and one improvement district. Rock Springs and Green River have water/sewer facilities as well. The Sweetwater County Joint Powers Water Board operates the water treatment plant in Green River, which serves both cities.

Kot said the cities and districts are facing "their own, unique concerns" in light of continued growth in the county. He said it's hard for districts to secure grants for improvement and expansion projects to meet those concerns, however.

Kot said the Reliance district, for example, needs a total sewer replacement. The district is so overloaded that it has restricted the issuance of new development permits.

"They've had poor election turnout, trouble with volunteer boards... They need funding, but they have no skills to write the grants themselves, and they really need to look at sources of revenue to fund these capital projects," Kot said.

He said one solution may be to coordinate services between districts and cities, or to possibly consolidate adjacent districts -- such as the 10-Mile and White Mountain districts north of Rock Springs -- into unified districts.

The county also needs to direct development to where current facilities are located, he said.

Legislative help?

Commission Chairman Wally Johnson said the Legislature should consider re-assessing tax structures to help the county's water/sewer districts deal with growth and infrastructure needs.

"If we had the dollars to take care of all these problems, our cities could grow, we could build affordable housing and fill jobs," he said.

"What we need is tax reform ... because right now, we're balancing the budget on the backs of individual taxpayers," Johnson said.

He said if the state holds down taxes and prices on coal and natural gas, it only benefits utility businesses and consumers in other states.

"I suggest we look at, say, an export tax on our coal, and let's reap the benefits of that," Johnson said. "For example, (an extra) \$1 per ton could raise \$350 to \$400 million in additional revenues. And we could very quickly have money available to handle problems here ... where the impacts are occurring."

He said Wyoming's mineral-rich counties including Sweetwater and Campbell shouldn't have to "carry the burden for other counties and other states... We have a right to expect our people don't suffer at the expense of other people, in other counties, and in other states."

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