

Sodaville hunts for water

By Jennifer Moody
Albany Democrat-Herald

City officials hope that stimulus money will help matters

In Sodaville, it's always been about the water. But these days, not enough of it is left.

City officials have tried just about everything to keep the taps flowing for their 303 customers: repairing the current system, trucking water from nearby Lebanon, rationing during the summer.

Now, they're going straight to the top — President Obama's economic stimulus package — for the money to start again.

Sodaville has hired an engineer and submitted a letter of interest to the Safe Drinking Water Revolving Loan Fund, part of the Oregon Economic Development Department, requesting \$684,000.

If they get it, city officials plan to use the money to drill a new well downhill from city hall, on the valley floor portion of town known as "the village." They'll also build a booster pump station and small holding tank, perhaps 10,000 gallons, and install some 2,800 feet of piping from the booster station to the feed line behind one of the city's five upper wells.

"It'll be state of the art when we're done," Mayor Brady Harrington said.

The Safe Drinking Water Revolving Loan Fund has grants, loans and combinations of both available for eligible projects through the Environmental Protection Agency. The idea is to help communities stay in compliance with environmental laws and deliver safe drinking water to their customers.

Program Policy Coordinator Karen Homolac said it will be a few weeks before her office learns exactly what strings come attached to the stimulus money and therefore which projects might qualify.

However, she said, the drinking water program has money available for such work anyway, stimulus or no stimulus. If Sodaville's letter of interest makes the cut under either program — something that should be known in the next couple of weeks — it can then submit an application for review.

With Oregon poised to receive some \$28 million for drinking water projects through the benefit package, Harrington and City Administrator Karen Corrington say they hope their project will be first in line.

"It actually is going to get people to work," Corrington said. "And it is shovel-ready."

Water woes

Named for its mineral springs, Sodaville was known in the 1800s as the place to take the waters.

The rich and famous came to town to drink from and bathe in the springs, widely considered cures for all ills. Contamination fears in the 1950s led to the plugging of the mineral wells.

Most Sodaville residents had their own wells until the early 1980s, Corrington said. Failing septic systems contaminated some of those and prompted the state to get involved. In 1984, Sodaville went to a citywide water system.

In recent years, however, the problem hasn't been quality, but lack of quantity.

Summertime meant a few weeks of water restrictions even in 1991, when Corrington moved to town. When she began reading meters in 1997, the town had three main wells and a 150,000-gallon holding tank.

The gravity-fed system wasn't regulated; pumps would simply turn on and run, nonstop, eventually burning out.

Leaks also plagued the system. In October 2002, a 20-gallon-per-minute leak flushed more than 320,000 gallons, more than a week's worth of water. An emergency transfer from the city of Lebanon saw Sodaville through that crisis.

Corrington became mayor in 2002, promising to improve the water situation. The city drilled two new wells in 2004 and turned what had been dead-end lines into a continuous loop.

In the next few years, Sodaville replaced pumps, installed low-water alarms and put in mechanical timers as a holding measure for a full-scale control panel, which is still in the works.

Steve Anderson, a Lebanon-area contractor, began working on the system about three years ago, most recently reconnecting a pump that was taken

offline after a pressurized line blew last summer.

Anderson said he's done what he can for Sodaville, but what the city really needs is an engineer.

"The issue that Sodaville has is one thing and one thing only," he said. "They don't have enough water."

Political turmoil

Funding and political crises have complicated the town's efforts to fix its system.

In 2005, Corrington, then city recorder, was fined \$7,200 by the state's Government Standards and Practices Commission for co-signing checks from the city to her husband's firm without publicly declaring it as a conflict of interest.

A firm owned by Corrington's brother-in-law is putting together the control panel for the water system, also a point of contention for some Sodaville residents.

In 2007, city recorder Kimberly Wolf was arrested for embezzling \$30,000 in city money. The resulting financial confusion complicated the city's efforts to apply for grants or loans.

For the past few years, the water table has steadily dropped, prompting use restrictions nearly year-round.

Without restrictions, Corrington estimates the city could sell 700,000 gallons of water in the winter and probably 1 million in the summer.

But as of October — before the rains began — the system was producing only 350,000 gallons.

Finding the flow

Corrington thinks the problem is development. People who want hillside homes are drilling new wells, tapping the existing aquifer and shrinking the supply. The time has come to dig into the valley floor.

Former mayor Chuck Mullenix, who served 30 years on the Sodaville City Council, said he thinks it's safer to tie Sodaville into Lebanon's water system, which has lines as far as the Crowfoot area a couple of miles away. If they drill in the village and hit water, he said, great.

"If they don't, they're out that much more money."

But Corrington and Harrington, the current mayor, say they're sure the water is just down the hill. And if they can't get the state to pay for the project, they'll move forward anyway.

Outside loans will be the answer if the stimulus package doesn't come through, Harrington said. The town restructured water rates in 2007, increasing them by about \$10 per month, in anticipation of someday paying back a construction loan.

Sodaville's upper aquifer simply has no more to give, Harrington said.

"We have expended all our avenues up here. We've done all we can do on this hill," he said. "This is more than just improvements. It's a necessity."