

Annexation resurfaces in sewer dilemma

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City could extend services if landowners consent to absorption

SANDPOINT -- The city's southern boundary could one day hurdle the Pend Oreille River and land in Sagle depending on the ultimate outcome of Southside Water & Sewer District's hookup dilemma.

City officials are meeting with the Bonner County commission on Wednesday to discuss the concept of expanding Sandpoint's area of city impact to include the utility district. The meeting is set for 3 p.m. at City Hall.

State law requires cities to identify impact areas on its fringes where development could occur and affect city services and infrastructure. The law affords cities the opportunity to have a say on development proposals in impact areas, but it can also serve as a prelude to annexation.

Exactly what's provoking the impact area discussion, however, seems to depend on which side of the river you're standing on.

Gary Wescott, chairman of Southside's board of directors, contends the impact area talks are not linked to the district's inability to meet the pressing demand for sewer hookups.

"It paves the way for the city to annex this area, but it does not have anything to do with our sewer problem," Wescott said last week. "It could eventually have something to do with it, but it doesn't have anything to do with it directly."

But Mayor Ray Miller said the impact area talks have very much to do with Southside's sewer problem, which has stifled development in Sagle for more than a year.

"They came to us and asked to be hooked into the sewer system," Miller said on Monday.

The prospect of annexation emerged last year, as Southside sought solutions to its capacity shortfall. The district planned to discharge treated wastewater into the river, but federal regulators rejected the proposal amid a chorus of objections from some residents.

The other options included purchasing more property to enhance the district's ability to apply wastewater on land or piping it across the river to Sandpoint's facilities.

"We basically decided if that discussion is going to go there," Miller said of the latter option, "we probably ought to look at maybe including them in the area of city impact," said Miller.

Annexation is embedded in the piping option because of the city generally declines to offer services outside its boundaries.

But annexation appears to be a concept which has little traction with Sagle landowners, judging by a straw poll conducted by the district. Wescott confirms there is little, if any, support for such a move, largely because it could increase property taxes in Sagle.

"The feedback I get is not only 'no,' but 'hell no,'" Wescott said.

If the city were to extend services to Southside, Miller said landowners in need of them would be required to give up their ability to fight annexation in the future. The annexation consent would be tied to the property despite subsequent changes in ownership.

Annexation consent has proven to be an important factor in previous annexation efforts by Sandpoint. Landowners around the airport and on the west side of town were unable to fend off annexation in the late 1980s and early 1990s because of consent-to-annex language tacked to their deeds via utility agreements.

Miller said there's no telling when annexation would occur if Southside landowners give consent because the concept is still in the "infancy stage."

"There is no timeframe," he said. "If they give us consent to annex in return for sewer service, it could be 10 years down the road."