

Commission seeking hearing on sewer discharge permit request

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SANDPOINT -- For Sagle residents opposed to a proposal for discharging treated wastewater into the Pend Oreille River, yesterday's hearing recommending a public hearing on Southside Water and Sewer District's permit application has to be as refreshing as the sight of clean water.

Following nearly three hours of testimony, the state's Lake Commission also unanimously passed a motion urging the district to withdraw its permit to pump effluents into Murphy Bay and continue its efforts seeking a land application instead.

With just seven days left in the Environmental Protection Agency comment period, which closes Dec. 27, the commission called on district to seek other options. The district's proposed hybrid discharge system that would pipe an estimated 100 gallons of treated sewage per minute into the river channel has been the subject of controversy and opposition since it was announced.

"I'm concerned with adding a new point-source (Murphy Bay) in the bay, which is a very big deal and a dangerous precedent," said commission chairman Ford Elsaesser. "Once it's there, it's impossible to get rid of."

Since the proposed discharge-treatment system could cost \$144,000, Elsaesser urged serious consideration for implementing a regional system that would have enough capital to build a state-of-the-art sewage treatment facility.

"There are just too many unknowns with discharging into the river, and I know this will add to the milfoil problem," said commission member Linda Mitchell.

The district, which has issued 200 more sewer permits than it can honor, proposed the hybrid discharge system early this year to augment its existing system of applying wastewater to land it owns. It contends wastewater would be piped into Murphy Bay during winter months.

"At first the district asked to discharge into Murphy Bay just for the winter," said Dennis O'Connor, who represented the Concerned Citizens of the Southside Water and Sewer District. "Now they're saying it would be for seven months. No one knows what affect this will have on the shallow, slow-circulating bay. But downstream loading could cause a problem in the future."

As far as options to the proposed wastewater discharge plan, district members said they have been looking for property to expand its land application capabilities. They have also entertained the notion of being annexed by the city of Sandpoint, which also discharges into the river but has greater sewer capacity.

"We have been searching for land for 1 1/2 years and have only come up with one (undisclosed) piece," said Gary Westcott. "If it could be purchased at a reasonable price, we would scrap the river discharge proposal."

But with property in Sagle running close to \$10,000 per acre, district members said it is looking at a hefty price tag of close to \$1 million.

Even if the EPA does grant the district its permit application to discharge effluent into the river, it would still need approval by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and Idaho Department of Lands.

But the Department of Environmental Quality project engineer for the district, which gave Southside Water and Sewer a grant to evaluate other options, said preliminary tests meet DEQ water quality standards.

"As far as we've gone so far, their proposal satisfies Dew's requirements," said John Tin dell.

Other options include a pressurized pipeline that would take discharge across the river as well as annexation into Sandpoint.

"The board doesn't believe annexation is in the best interest to the district because it could raise property tax 23 percent," said Paul Klatt of J-U-B Engineers, representing Southside.

But discharging into the river also raises a nutrient problem -- namely, nitrogen -- according to Diane Williams of the Tri-State Water Board.

"We have Sandpoint and Dover looking at expanding their discharge," she said. "It's the cumulative impact we need to look at, not just this one district."

Opponents to the district's proposal in Murphy Bay said that Springy Point State Park is just a half mile downstream from the discharge pipe and that activities like swimming, fishing and boating could become compromised with declining water quality. Additionally, they claim nutrients present in treated sewage could promote milfoil and algae proliferation.

"I hope you protect our waterways," urged Rosemary Shoong, a Sagle landowner who has been leading the campaign against the proposal.

Her sentiments were echoed by another Sagle resident who said degradation of water quality was a concern to him.

"Nobody wants sewage treatment plants in their neighborhoods so putting it in the river is a way of making it someone else's problem," said Chris Hecht. "What can we do as a community to come up with a better solution?"