

Southside extends sewer hookup moratorium

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SAGLE -- Development in parts of the Southside Water and Sewer District remains on indefinite hold because of a capacity shortage in the sewage system.

The district's board of directors voted unanimously late Wednesday to continue a moratorium on new sewer connections for at least another year, or until upgrades are made to meet demands.

The moratorium was first imposed about five months ago, bringing development in some areas of the district to a standstill. The ban comes amid national exposure the region is receiving because of its rural lifestyles and natural beauty.

The district said it has 332 1/2 active hookups and 20 more hookups that have been granted, but not activated. There are also 174 people in the Fry Creek area who are paying a local improvement district tax, but can't get permits because there isn't enough land on which to apply treated effluent.

Additionally, there is land within the district's bounds that can still be subdivided, which could result in the need for as many as 50 more hookups.

"Our problem isn't that we can't treat the sewage. We haven't any place to put the effluent," board Chairman Gary Wescott said on Thursday.

District officials met with nearly 70 residents at Sagle Elementary on Wednesday to discuss the continuation of the moratorium and steps that can be taken to increase Southside's ability to process waste.

The only thing harder than the questions being posed by Southside residents were the answers.

Some have paid their way into the district but still can't hook up. Some are ready to build on raw land, but can't get a building location permit from Bonner County because Southside is unable to issue a sewer permit.

"We're just left up a creek without a paddle?" asked one landowner who is ready to build but can't.

For some, the answer was "yes." However, some landowners are allowed to install temporary septic systems if their land can percolate waste. If the water table is too high, though, the Panhandle Health District won't issue a permit for a septic tank.

It's still not known how long landowners will be in limbo.

The district has submitted an application for a discharge permit from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and is hunting for land that's suitable for land application. It's also talking with the city of Sandpoint about using its facilities to process waste.

But each option comes with drawbacks. Many object to the idea of pumping waste into the river and the discharge system could be rendered obsolete if regulators impose more stringent water quality standards.

Acquiring more ground for land application, meanwhile, is a process that's expected to be costly and lengthy.

"I personally believe that in order to get land, we're going to have to go through eminent domain (proceedings) to get it," Wescott said on Thursday. "Then it's going to be up to the courts to decide what the property's worth."

Having the city deal with the waste is expected to eventually lead to annexation because Sandpoint is averse to extending its services outside the city limits. District officials estimate annexation would result in a 29 percent tax increase.

A survey conducted by the district suggests land acquisition is the most popular option. However, some remain concerned the district still seems to be homing in on the discharge option.

Rosemary Shoong, one of the more vociferous discharge opponents, is not convinced the board is shying away from infusing the river with wastewater. But she is heartened by the uptick in involvement from other district residents.

"It's just great that people are coming forward -- it's so important," she said on Thursday.

The only course of action that seems clear is that the district won't pick a "do-nothing" option.

"We've got to go somewhere and we've got to do it in a speedy manner," Wescott said on Wednesday.