

Hope officials looking to cut costs on water system upgrade

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Higher user and hookup fees likely in 2005

HOPE -- Faced with engineering and construction costs that may top \$250,000 to add sand filtration to the municipal water system, officials are exploring ways to shave at least \$100,000 from current estimates for the project.

"The city has a history of doing things for itself," said Mayor Larry Keith at a special workshop meeting of the Council Wednesday night. He suggested Hope could save by not using federally funded grants -- which can increase project costs -- and by tackling major portions of the construction wherever possible, acting as its own contractor.

The state Department of Environmental Quality has directed Hope to begin the process of adding filtration, and has labeled the city's water as "surface water-influenced," meaning it could be contaminated by organisms, particularly during the wet spring season.

In addition to the sand filters, Coeur d'Alene-based engineer Robert Tate outlined three other alternatives the city could pursue to comply with the DEQ order, including cartridge filters at an estimated cost of \$92,000; a germicidal ultraviolet light setup for about \$87,000; and developing ground water wells for around \$160,000.

Hope's water is supplied by an all-gravity system from springs high above the city and is disinfected, but not filtered. Despite the DEQ concerns, no cases of sickness from its city water ever have been documented.

All alternatives but the sand filters require adding electric pumps to the system -- a move that would end the current all-gravity operation that continues to supply water to the city even during power outages. Hope Council members have stressed they want to retain the gravity-fed system if at all possible.

Officials at Wednesday's meeting all favored the sand filtration option, which also had the benefit of not needing additional chemicals to function. Tate said he did not consider the well option viable because of the risk involved in finding underground water in volumes sufficient to supply a city.

The UV-light system has the disadvantages of needing electrical power and more chemicals -- and is not currently a DEQ-recognized treatment method in Idaho to comply with the filtration requirement. The cartridge filters would comply, but also need more chemicals and pumps.

Paying for the DEQ-mandated upgrade also is a concern for city officials, who say they don't want to put Hope into debt or burden current homeowners with high monthly water user rates. The tiny city has only 70 water customers, limiting the amount of extra revenue a user fee increase would generate.

Keith said the city would likely be moving in the direction of adding water meters to all connections, along with a combination of raising user rates and hookup fees. Residential water customers presently are not metered, and are charged \$150 a year for unlimited volumes.

The current Hope water hook-up fee of \$2,500 could more than double next year. Keith said vacant property owners might be moved to buy water hookups in advance of a fee increase, which could raise "seed money" for the filtration project.

"If eight people did it, that's \$20,000 for the city," Keith said.

Tate provided an itemized estimate for the sand filter project, and officials identified areas where the city could save money by doing the work itself or using lower-cost local contractors. If Hope used grant money involving federal dollars, project costs could increase because of mandatory higher wages and required oversight measures.

In other water-related business, Keith said the city should obtain the rights to pump water from Lake Pend Oreille to fight wildfires, a constant threat every summer on the warm, south-facing slope on which Hope is located.

Tate will return with another update on the water system upgrade at the next regular meeting of the Hope City Council, set for Wednesday, Dec. 1, at 6:30 p.m. in City Hall.