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City discusses waterplant plans

By *Patty Brant*



Planning in earnest for the city's new waterplant has begun. The commissioners heard presentations from ATM's Grant Misterly and attorney Bill Sundstrom, who delineated three alternatives. It's a tricky concept, estimating future demand for water when development is coming on so strong, but future demand must be taken into account. Several developers have already asked for city water connections, but a number of proposed developments around the city have not as yet indicated they do. Mr. Sundstrom, who has some 20 years experience in dealing with water issues, assured the board that developers will almost certainly line up for city water. He also stressed that, if the city does not soon step up to the plate, a private facility will. That will mean higher costs for everyone.

Currently, LaBelle's outdated waterplant has a 1 million gallon per day (gpd) capacity. General plans are to build a membrane softening plant and draw from the Hawthorne aquifer, which is high in chlorides n hence the need for a membrane softening system for filtration. Waste brine from the system will need to be disposed of n preferably in a deep injection well, the most common and cheapest way. A membrane softening system will also solve any trihalomethane issues the city may have had. (Equipment to solve the current TTHM issue should be in place this week.)

At this time, LaBelle has 1,850 water customers. The new plant will be able to use the current plant's storage tanks. By the year 2010, the city expects to have 2,215 customers (without the South LaBelle Community) or 2,779 (with that development).

A new plant should be viable over a ten-year period before additions should be necessary.

A new waterplant will most likely be placed in the South LaBelle Community.

LaBelle commissioners voted to pursue the third alternative, which would serve customers in the current city limits including South LaBelle Community, and planned developments to the west of the city and also to the north of the river.

Whichever scenario the city ultimately chooses, the plan is to start designing and permitting as soon as possible and build in 2008.

The city will need to enter into an interlocal agreement with Hendry County for either the #2 or #3 alternative. Also, any of the three will take approximately 18 months to design and a year for construction, plus permitting time.

First alternative: This would serve the current city and South LaBelle Community only. By 2010 the city expects to have 2,800 water connections. Under this

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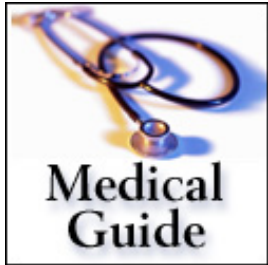
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alternative, the plant would be 2.5 million gpd and cost over \$18 million. The city needs no interlocal agreement with the county to do this alternative.

Second alternative:

This is the alternative Mr. Sundstrom focused on as being most cost effective. It would add lines to serve coming development west of the city and south of the river. This 4.5 million gpd plant would serve 6,500 customers and would include a new pump and storage facility at the end of the line. Preliminary cost estimates are \$30 million.

A number of developments are planned in this area, but have not yet committed to using city water if available.

Mr. Sundstrom told the board that it would not be cost effective to do all the "western loop" unless developers pay a refundable advance for upfront costs and the city collects pro rata as customers come on, returning their investment to developers. This alternative would require an interlocal agreement with the county for the city to serve customers outside its boundaries.

Third alternative:

Although he felt it was really the best, Mr. Sundstrom said he would not recommend #3 until developers step up with up-front cash. This would need to be a 5 million gpd plant to serve 7,600 customers including the city, South LaBelle Community and developments west and north of the river. Preliminary cost is estimated at \$38.75 million.

Commissioner Puletti preferred #3 as the best overall for the future. He also noted that the city had made a mistake previously by not contacting the county before setting up a new water/sewer service area outside its boundaries and did not want to make that mistake again.

Commissioner Zimmerly said she was not prepared to vote that night because she had not had appropriate time to study the information provided.

Mr. Sundstrom assured the board that developers will want sewer as well. However, the city just completed a new wastewater plant that will be good till 2014 and will accommodate both the city and Bonita Bay with a 750 million gpd capacity. The plant is currently operating at one-third capacity.

Commissioner Puletti moved to direct staff to move forward on option 3 n opening discussions with the county. The motion was approved 4-1, with Commissioner Zimmerly dissenting. If developers are not forthcoming with up-front money, the decision can still be rethought.

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