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Council could decide water project without public vote

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Thursday, February 14, 2008 2:05 PM MST

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The Fort Morgan City Council has not yet voted on whether or not to pay the \$36 million to be a part of the Northern Integrated Supply Project (NISP) but could do so without the public.

While NISP is included in the water conservation plan the council approved Tuesday evening, it was only in a section which spoke about possible future plans, said Fort Morgan Mayor Jack Darnell.

He was prompted to make the statement after fort Morgan resident Dennis Hall asked the council if the public would ever have a chance to vote on the city's involvement in NISP.

Darnell said that since the water department is an enterprise, not specifically funded by taxes, the council could vote to approve a share in NISP without taking it to the public, although it could go to a vote. That has not been decided yet.

The water conservation plan is a document required by the Water Conservation Act of 2004. It is supposed to detail what the city is doing to save water, with certain requirements built in by the law, said Utilities Director Gary Dreessen.

NISP is a plan to create a reservoir by 2019 to hold water for northern Colorado use, from which Fort Morgan could receive the equivalent of 3,600 acre feet of water. A bond issue would be required to finance \$25 million needed by 2010. A second phase would cost about \$11.5 million, says the plan.

The plan also contains a profile of the existing water system, the city's water use and forecast of future use, potential facilities needs, conservation goals and measures and an implementation plan.

This was simply an update of a 1996 plan and reflects the change from well water to Colorado-Big Thompson water, Dreessen said.

The city water system serves an estimated 11,700 people, with 3,600 acre feet used in 2005 and just over 4,000 acre feet in 2006. The city's supply of C-BT water is about 5,600 acre feet, which is based on a 70 percent quota of its allotment.

The major conservation goal was to meter all service connections, which was finished by 2000.

"There are no imminent or pressing water supply or delivery issues in the city which require immediate conservation action," although there are xeriscape demonstration gardens and an effort to

be efficient in irrigating parks, the plan's summary concludes.

Interestingly, a reduced flow of water through the sewers causes solids to build up, which plugs the pipelines when they are not carried out by water. This situation requires increased maintenance on the sewer system, which means increased costs, the plan says.

Plugged sewer lines were the subject of discussion by council members for another reason.

The council was talking about a new policy for dealing with customers when a sewer backs up, damaging private property. This is the result of some complaints and suits brought last year, said City Attorney Jeffrey Wells.

The new policy allows the city to offer a "good faith" payment to residents affected by a sewer backup without an admission of liability. This could prevent some litigation and is something other cities do, he said.

A payment would range from \$500-\$3,000 depending on the amount of damage and a claimant's insurance deductible. The first \$500 does not require a dollar match by a claimant, but any other payment would require a dollar-for-dollar match by the resident, Wells said.

If the clog is in the landowner's own pipe, not a city line, the city would not offer a payment, he said.

Fort Morgan's sewer system is composed of 50 miles of pipeline. In the past, they were on a three-year maintenance schedule, but problem areas will now be cleaned out each year, Dreessen said.

In addition to the problem of low water flow causing clogs, there is the issue of how some parts of pipeline are hard to access. Some areas do not have alleys or manholes near homes and that makes it hard to get to lines, he said.

Also, the city cannot regulate what people put down their drains which may clog lines, Dreessen said.

The city is looking at opening up easements around homes with no alleys, which means property owners should take a look at what trees and structures are in the way of access, said Councilman James Powers.

He made a public appeal for landowners to cooperate in the effort.

The council will make a decision on whether to approve the new sewer backup policy at the next regular meeting.

Council members approved the purchase of a new sanitation refuse truck complete with compactor for \$140,900 to replace a 1999 truck with 98,000 miles on it. The choice was not made for the least expensive bid, because the difference was less than \$800 and the new truck will be the same as the other garbage trucks, which will make maintenance easier and cheaper, Dreessen said.

Bids for land parcels in the Fort Morgan industrial park and to provide a portable air compressor for the power department are still open until Feb. 22.

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