

Building boom pushes city's wastewater treatment plant to limit

By [BROOK GRIFFIN](#) Chronicle Staff Writer

The city of Bozeman is not in trouble yet, but its wastewater treatment facility needs to be expanded and residents are going to get the bill.

"We're just starting to push the envelope," Tom Adams, superintendent of the facility, said.

Every day the city's wastewater treatment plant takes in about 5 million gallons of raw sewage. That is more or less the limit, and every new house or business built in town puts extra strain on the system.

As a result, the Bozeman City Commission is making a treatment plant expansion the highest priority for 2006.

"It's not an option, it's a necessity," Adams said. "We simply need to expand so the community can grow over the next 20 years."

The unprecedented growth of the city over the last decade has put a huge strain on the plant. And growth cannot continue if the plant is left the way it is for much longer, Adams said.

"I think all of us are looking at this as a pretty big deal," said Mayor Jeff Krauss.

The city cannot grow past the limits of the plant, he said, and in a real sense the plant's future goes hand in hand with the city's.

"It determines a lot of things, particularly what our urban growth boundary is," Krauss said. "How big of an area do we service?"

Expanding the plant won't be cheap, said officials. City Manager Chris Kukulski said final costs for all phases of the expansion could run close to \$60 million.

A chunk of that stems from state and federal rules that call for new technology to be installed in all wastewater treatment plants. Those improvements would have to be made regardless of the city's growth rate.

Paying for the expansion will fall on residents.

"We will be raising rates," Krauss said.

Bozeman Finance Director Anna Rosenberry said higher utility rates will be the primary source of funding, although how much rates will rise is still a mystery.

“What the magnitude of that increase will be, we don't know,” she said.

Ratepayers have already seen increases in monthly bills. In late May 2005, the commission voted to increase rates by 15 percent in anticipation of the expansion project.

That meant about \$2.35 extra per user, an amount that is expected to generate \$420,000 in revenue for the new plant this year.

A portion of the city's impact fee money, about \$7.6 million, could also be directed toward the project by the commission. That money, however, is also slated for fixing old sewer lines in the city, so it is doubtful, Rosenberry said, that the commission will put the whole amount into the wastewater plant.

Instead, Rosenberry said the city will probably have to borrow the bulk of the money to pay for the project.

The annual debt payment for borrowing such a large sum, however, will probably be enormous. A \$10 million loan spread over a 25-year period would cost the city about \$775,000 a year, Rosenberry said.

And the loan still wouldn't cover all costs, which points to residents having to pay higher rates to make up the difference.

What makes the wastewater plant project unique is the urgency. If the plant is not expanded the city could find itself in the worst-case scenario of imposing a building moratorium until capacity is enlarged.

Adams said there is time to deal with the problem, but it needs to start sooner rather than later.

Director of Public Services Debbie Arkell said the expansion project would have to take place at some point, no matter how fast the city grows.

“Even if Bozeman wasn't growing, we would have to update the facility someday,” Arkell said.

As is the case in any big construction project, the cost would be less now than if it was done in five years simply because of increased construction costs, she said.

Kukulski said there could be commission movement on the issue soon.

“Within the next 90 days they will be fully briefed and will have to make pretty substantial decisions,” he said.

Some critics in town have said the city should have been aware of this problem a long time ago.

But Kukulski said no one in the city “dropped the ball” on planning for the future. There was no way of anticipating Bozeman would grow as rapidly as it has.

“Bozeman was as well prepared for this as any other city I've stepped into,” he said. “(growth) just went way beyond what everybody anticipated.”