

DOWN THE DRAIN

A Report on the Ukiah Valley Sanitation District

May 24, 2007

Summary

Usually no one is very concerned about where wastewater goes when we flush our toilets, wash our clothes, and do our dishes. It is only when rates go up, new ordinances are enacted, or when sewer pipes break that our attention is drawn to “now what?!” With the improvement and expansion of the City of Ukiah Waste Water Treatment Plant many issues have come to light. The obvious will be the rate increase, but that is just the beginning. Ukiah Valley residents will be expanding their vocabulary, learning words like tertiary (treated waste water), infiltration (rainwater in the sewer system), exfiltration (sewage in the ground water) and what is an Equivalent Single Sewer Unit (ESSU).

Background

The 2006-2007 Grand Jury chose to investigate the structure and operation of the Ukiah Valley Sanitation District (UVSD).

The UVSD was formed on July 6, 1954 by the Mendocino County Board of Supervisor’s action, in anticipation of area growth. Because of the growth of the City over the years there are areas within the city limits that are served by the district. This has resulted in a complicated system. The UVSD owns the pipes and laterals, which bring sewage from homes outside the city limits to the processing plant which is owned by the City. The City owns the pipes where the City and district do not overlap.

Major problems include rainwater infiltrating the system, and exfiltration of sewage leaking into the ground water. In the summer months, the Waste Water Treatment Plant processes three million gallons a day; in the winter, the plant processes 21 million gallons a day. Much of this increase is due to the aging condition of the laterals and mains of the sewer system. Many of the pipes are 100 years old and some of the vaults located at the manholes leak.

In 1995 a decision was made jointly by the City and the UVSD to:

- undertake upgrading and rehabilitation of the current Waste Water Treatment Plant;
- develop plans to provide increased capacity to meet the projected needs of the valley for the next 20 years.

The collective efforts to achieve these goals are referred to as the Wastewater Treatment Plant Improvements Project (Project). Ten years later, in 2005, a contract was signed for this Project.

Methods

The Grand Jury interviewed City and County officials, City employees, and a Special Districts expert. They examined City and UVSD documents, relevant agreements, and the Project contract.

Findings

1. UVSD is organized as a Special District.
2. The UVSD Board of Directors (BOD) are appointed annually by the presiding officers of the Board of Supervisors (BOS) and the Ukiah City Council (UCC). It consists of two members of the BOS and a UCC member who are appointed annually.
3. The UVSD is represented in legal affairs by the City of Ukiah Attorney and County Counsel.
4. Operation and management of all UVSD assets and operations are performed by the City of Ukiah, including the new Project.
5. There have been no UVSD external audits conducted.
6. The UVSD has no independent staff. City employees provide all staffing functions for the UVSD.
7. The Grand Jury heard testimony from several sources that city staff has not presented vital information in a timely manner to the UVSD.
8. The UVSD Waste Water Treatment Plant is faced with the necessity to process 21 million gallons of wastewater in the winter months as compared to 3 million gallons in the summer.
9. The 2005 Project includes \$33 million for the upgrade (Upgrade Project), \$24 million for new construction (Capacity Project), and \$12 million for financing costs for a projected total cost of \$69 million.
10. Sewer use is measured in ESSUs. These are based on the average discharge of a single-family residence.
11. The Upgrading Project costs are shared between the City and UVSD on the basis of the relative ESSUs. The contractor is paid on the basis of the percentage of completion of the upgrading work.
12. The costs for the Capacity Project are shared on the basis of a 65% UVSD/35% City ratio as established in the Project Agreement. The costs are paid out on the basis of percent completion.
13. The 2005 contract for a new Waste Water Treatment Plant was planned to increase capacity by 2400 ESSUs, and to accommodate winter rainwater flow.
14. Funds for construction come from two sources: sewer fees and new connections.
15. The contract provides for mutual UVSD and City financial obligation for the next 30 years.

16. The cost of the Project is financed by the City of Ukiah, which will be repaid by the City and UVSD ratepayers, and new connections; sewer rates are planned to continue to increase.
17. The City Public Utilities Director supervises wastewater sewer operations. The City Public Works Director supervises streets, roads and is responsible for the storm runoff system.
18. There is a Waste Water Treatment Plant on the old Masonite property.

Recommendations

The Grand Jury recommends that:

1. the UVSD be reorganized to include elected board members. Terms of office should be staggered. (Findings 2, 4, 6, 7)
2. the UVSD consider hiring a general manager to represent its interests. (Findings 2, 4, 6, 7)
3. the UVSD Board adopts policies and procedures that ensure they receive information in a timely manner. (Findings 4, 6, 7)
4. the UVSD ensure that external financial and performance audits are performed. (Findings 4, 5)
5. the County, UVSD, and the City coordinate their efforts to address rainwater runoff. (Findings 8, 13)
6. all participating parties in the UVSD investigate if the Masonite wastewater treatment plant is a viable resource. (Finding 18)

Comments

This report can only begin to address some of the wastewater issues that face the Ukiah Valley over the next 20 years. This year's Grand Jury elected to begin addressing questions regarding sewer treatment issues and the organizational structure of the Ukiah Valley Sanitation District.

Other questions regarding infiltration of storm waters into the treatment system, exfiltration of wastewater into the soil, release of effluent (treated water), and the impact of new State requirements will need to be addressed. The matter will be recommended to the 2007/2008 Grand Jury for investigation.

Responses Required

Board of Supervisors (All Findings; Recommendations 2-6)
Ukiah Valley Sanitation District (All findings; All Recommendations)
City of Ukiah (All Findings; Recommendations 2-6)

Response Requested

Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO) (All Findings; All Recommendations)