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Natural restoration may lead to savings in mitigation contract

BY ADAM WALLWORTH Northwest Arkansas Times
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The city of Fayetteville may save \$ 100, 000 on the Wastewater System Improvement Project, thanks to Mother Nature.

The savings is coming from the city’s contract for wetland mitigation around the site of the new sewer plant. Much of the mitigation is happening on its own, said Dave Jurgens, water and sewer director.

“ Nature is doing what nature does, ” he said.

Jurgens said many of the items in the contract for mitigation will not be needed because the site is restoring itself. He said that after berm construction and selective spraying of invasive species, the wetland plant species have increased from 51 to 266 without planting.

The return of the habitat is bringing back birds and other wildlife that have been absent for years, Jurgens said.

“ It’s amazing how you can take a seemingly insignificant tweak and have a habitat, ” he said.

Jurgens said the city and contractor have agreed that there is no need to finish out the contract. However, the question has been put forth as to whether to use the remaining funds to expand the wetlands beyond what is required to offset those destroyed for the construction of the sewer plant.

The plant construction required the creation of 46 acres of wetlands, Jurgens said, but the city could use that savings to increase that to 60-70 acres of wetlands. The additional wetlands could be used as a bank and sold to developers to mitigate disturbances on their own sites, he said.

Though the revenue source would be welcome, Jurgens said, a bigger bonus would be the creation of a park. He said the park would be limited to pedestrians only — no bikes or dogs.

He said the trails could be built on the berms. The park could also feature bird-watching stations and a parking area that would be made with an alternative to asphalt.

A corporate sponsor is being sought to develop the park aspect, Jurgens said, and more research is being done over the potential wetland bank. The U. S. Army Corps of Engineers has toured the

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site and expressed initial support for the idea, he said.

Jurgens said the city could expand the wetlands without limiting the expansion of the plant. The first plant expansion is planned to occur to the south of the plant, and that would likely be the final footprint because of advances in technology that are expected to occur before an additional expansion would be needed, he said.

The wetlands will have to be maintained over the years, he said, but this site appears to be more likely to survive than others because of how it is coming back on its own.

Ward 2 Alderman Kyle Cook, chairman of the Water and Sewer Committee, said he likes the idea of turning the wetland site into a park but remains undecided on the bank.

“ I’m going to look at it, but I’m a little squeamish about making a business venture out of it, ” he said.

He said the idea is worth looking into, but until there is an actual plan it will be hard to say whether it will get support.

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