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Sewer Plant Open 10-Year, Massive Project Cost \$186.5 Million

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THE MORNING NEWS

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FAYETTEVILLE -- It's enough concrete to pour a 4-inch slab covering more than 60 acres. The dirt excavated for the new Westside Wastewater Treatment Plant could cover an acre and mound to 98 feet. Some 40 miles of pipe worm their way underground.

It was one of the most ambitious municipal public works projects Fayetteville has undertaken.

As construction winds down a few days prior to the scheduled completion date in October, builders and city officials are already looking to the future.

"In 40 years, it'll be really interesting to see what's here," David Jurgens, Fayetteville's wastewater director, told a crowd of about 100 gathered under a tent Thursday for the facility's grand opening.

"My prediction is when we fly over Fayetteville in 40 years, the biggest green spot is going to be this site," Jurgens said, as a warm humid breeze drifted under the tent. The close, fetid smell of sewer was strangely absent.

Jurgens was calling attention to more than 25 acres of wetland adjacent to the three-acre site. The area was set aside for creating a natural prairie and savannah. In the couple years since the Woolsey Wet Prairie Sanctuary project began, some 350 species of animals and plants have been spotted in the area, said Bruce Shackleford, president of Environmental Consulting Operations.

The wetland area is only part of the \$186.5 million sewer project. With the new facility, Fayetteville's sewer capacity jumped from 12.6 to 21.2 million gallons a day. It was a \$60 million phase of the project. In addition to the Westside site, the project brought upgrades to the Noland Sewer Plant and 13 new or renovated lift stations, Jurgens said.

But when the project was launched 10 years ago, it was not quite the behemoth it became in cost or scope.

The Westside treatment plant was a \$47.6 million project expected to be up and running in 2005. But almost from day one, the project's costs have been over budget. Initial bids came in above the \$60 million cap the city had in place.

By 2006, officials learned the full nature of not only the increased costs to what was on the drawing boards, but the \$12 million in needed lines and lift stations strangely left out of the original proposal. The original financing plan for the project was a 3/4 percent sales tax the voters approved in 2001. When it became clear the tax would not raise enough money to complete the ballooning project, in 2006 the voters were asked to extend the 3/4 percent sales tax to 2018 -- a \$42 million bond package -- to cover the continued rising cost of the plant. According to official estimates at the time, if the voters would have rejected the tax, sewer rates would have risen 30 percent.

Since 1998 increased operation costs have tracked water and sewer rates steadily up. In 1998, the cost for the first 2,000 gallons of water and using the smallest sized meter brought the water and sewer bill to \$16.72, according to city documents. By 2008, residential customers were paying \$19.57 for the same service. These prices are for Fayetteville residents and do not include sales taxes.

Officials associated with the project blame a lack of communication and blind faith in those in charge as the reason for the debacle.

"There should have been a more open process during this whole thing," said Lioneld Jordan, a Fayetteville City Councilman who serves on the water and sewer committee.

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"I'm glad that it's come to fruition, but it's three years late and \$60 million over budget," Jordan, a candidate for mayor, added.

For his part, Mayor Dan Coody said communication could have been better.

"The fault that I find in myself here is that -- no matter what we would have done, we could not have changed the cost of steel and cement and that sort of thing -- but we could have communicated that better to the public," Coody lamented.

"It would not have changed the outcome, but it would have changed the expectation," he added.

And in retrospect, Coody has openly acknowledged that not only the city, but his office somewhat dropped the ball on the sewer project.

With re-election approaching, the mired sewer plant could be an albatross for the mayor.

"Because a lot of this is political," Coody reflected. "The easiest thing to do is to blame the mayor for this."

And that seems to be what at least one of his opponents is doing.

"The buck has to stop at the mayor's office," Jordan said. "We put a lot of faith in the management team. We put a lot of faith in the senior staff. And we put a lot of faith in the administration," Jordan said.

Coody maintains he was not always given good information on the project he inherited when he took office in 2001. Original cost estimates were done in 2000.

"I wasn't told that when I took office," Coody said.

Projects taken on by the city today get closer scrutiny, he said.

"We adjust for inflation. We put a realistic timeline with it. And we adjust according to what we think the economy might be doing," Coody said.

All the projects since then have been coming in right on -- or under -- budget," Coody added.

The original bid documents also left out key residual projects like paving Broyles Road and needed lift stations. It was an \$11 million oversight, said the mayor.

"And I can't really answer why they weren't (in the bid documents,)" Coody said.

"When people say 'cost overruns,' what they really mean is that the cost is more than what it had been estimated in 1998," Coody said.

In the 1990s, the rule-of-thumb for constructing a waste-water treatment plant was \$4 a gallon. That number is closer to \$6 a gallon today, Coody said.

The project took a substantial turn in 2005 when the city learned the extent of the cost overruns.

In June 2005 the city council relinquished its contract with Burns & McDonnell, the firm hired to manage the project and oversee the design and bidding process.

"Burns & McDonnell was hired to make sure the project went smoothly, stayed on time and on budget," Coody said.

Burns & McDonnell said the project was on time and on budget until February 2005 when city officials were told there was no way to build the plant in the 12 to 18 months.

"I didn't know that," Coody explained.

After dismissing Burns & McDonnell the project moved in-house under the leadership of wastewater director David Jurgens.

In July 2005 Jurgens took over the operation of the wastewater department after the resignation of Bob Davis, who stepped down after being arrested on charges of public intoxication. Davis had spent less than five months in the post. He had taken over after Greg Boettcher left for a job in Florida.

Jurgens has been credited as a skilled juggler keeping multiple construction contracts on track -- some halting, some moving forward. It's Jurgens' steering that kept the project progressing, allowing it to be completed nearly six months before its October 2008 completion date. The plant began treating sewerage in May 2008.

But more importantly, the new sewer plant -- under Jurgens' guidance -- has stayed on budget.

"We are watching every single penny, literally," Jurgens said recently, recalling the missteps in the sewer plant project.

"We took a hit, absolutely," Jurgens reflected. "We solved the problem, and we moved forward."

"But is it all a completely happy story? No, it's not," he added.

By The Numbers

- 21.2: Millions of gallons that Fayetteville's new wastewater system will be capable of handling daily.
- 115,000: Estimated population the new system will be able to service
- 32,300: Cubic yards of concrete installed
- 31: Miles of new pipelines
- 28: Major construction contracts

Source: staff report

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