

Tired of leaks, breaks, unscheduled outages?

Written by By Kevin Opsahl Sun Correspondent
Friday, 21 May 2021 04:25



Gallup includes pipe replacement in latest budget

Gallup has been the site of numerous unscheduled water outages in recent months. The city's aging water pipes have kept Gallup Water and Sanitation Director Dennis Romero and his crew busy making repairs.

Romero said water line breaks in Gallup are trending "slightly downward, as we've made a concerted effort to move line replacement projects forward."

The attention to the city's aging water lines comes at a time that the country is studying infrastructure issues.

Gallup has 201.4 miles of water lines, according to Romero.

The oldest pipes — some of them close to 100 years old — are made of cast iron. After World War II, materials like ductile iron and asbestos cement were used. Lately, the pipes have been made of PVC, which has been in short supply recently because of the pandemic's impact on the economy in Texas, where most of the pipe is manufactured.

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"The age of the lines coupled with the materials, are the reasons water lines break," Romero wrote in an email. "Cast iron does corrode over time. ... Cast iron lines are typically designed for a 50-year service life."

The water lines made of asbestos cement — which is known to cause health problems and is being monitored by the Environmental Protection Agency — is actually not a threat to residents, Romero said. That's because it is not broken up and airborne, which is how it can impact people.

Romero is not sure of the ratio of old to new pipes because he does not yet have a system up and running to check that. But he did say the age of pipes depends on their location within the city. Some of the century-old pipes are located downtown and on Gallup's north side.

Gallup city officials would like to take care of some \$1.2 million in water line projects over the next fiscal year, according to documents they provided the *Sun* in early May.

Councilwoman Fran Palochak, Dist. 4, told the *Sun* recently she believes Gallup has been reactive rather than proactive in regard to water lines. Romero largely agreed with her point of view.

"This problem has been growing and festering for a while," he said. "While I agree with her that we want to move forward so that we're not having to be in the full-on repair mode, what I'm also saying is, we're going to have to do both (be proactive and reactive) for a while."

Romero said the water line problems have been going on longer than Palochak has been in office.

"She makes a lot of sense. I want to make sure I say that," he said. "She shows a lot of wisdom with that perspective."

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POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Gallup Mayor Louis Bonaguidi said he and city councilors have considered the city's water line issues from different angles.

"I think everybody knows the situation. It all takes money," he said. "This past year has been a scramble just to stay ahead of everything."

The coronavirus pandemic didn't help. Last year, when he became mayor, Bonaguidi oversaw a budget that was slashed by 30 percent.

"You try to plan ahead, 'Ok, what are we going to do this year?' But when you cut the budget, you have to cut back on some of that," he said.

Romero also mentioned the ways that the pandemic impacted the city's water lines. Water line replacement is considered a capital outlay. Such expenditures were suspended in 2020 due to COVID-19.

"We went off of what has been approved in prior years," Romero wrote in an email. "We also went to [city] council a few times for approval of projects."

Romero told the *Sun* his department requested \$250,000 for 2019 and 2020 in a line item known as "MnR-Maintenance and Repair" and received and spent it in each of those years.

This coming Fiscal Year, 2021-2022, they requested the \$250,000 MnR line item as well as an additional \$200,000 to be used to target the cast iron lines throughout the city.

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He is optimistic that both items will be approved.

The city was able to complete four replacement projects in the distribution system this past year — all of which Romero described as fairly large.

“We will focus on mid-sized projects to smaller projects this coming fiscal year,” he wrote. “The projects we are moving forward are those we can do with the revenue we collect from our customers.

“We can always use more money, but we want to be fiscally prudent and not take on additional debt,” he said.

Romero wants residents to understand that when it comes time to actually replacing water lines, it can cost a couple hundred thousand dollars.

“You’re not only just digging up the ground, you have to cut through asphalt and, in some cases, you have to remove the curb, gutter and sidewalk, and people’s driveways, occasionally,” he said.

In recent city strategic planning meetings, a top priority for 2021 is to get direction and funding for upgrading the city’s water lines. Additionally, improving the city’s infrastructure was listed by the mayor and council members as one of four priorities over the next five years.

In addition to using what funds are available, Romero said his department has been working on an asset management plan, tied in with the city’s Geographic Information System to inventory Gallup’s infrastructure — from water wells to water lines. A color-coded system will tell Romero and others the age and urgency of repairs to every bit of infrastructure.

“That should have been done a few years ago. Unfortunately, it wasn’t,” Romero said. “But we are now hustling to get that done and once we have that, it’s going to help us plan our projects

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or replacement projects out. Two, track all our work orders. Three, it will give us a cost of our assets."

He hopes the asset management plan will be complete by mid-summer.

ECONOMIC IMPACT

Rep. Patricia Lundstrom, D-Gallup, the executive director of the Greater Gallup Economic Development Corporation is a contractor for economic development services with the city.

She emphasized the importance of utilities in attracting new business to a city such as Gallup.

She said GGEDC includes basic information on utilities on its website to assist companies in making cost calculations.

Lundstrom said the GGEDC's focus is on manufacturing and e-based companies, and when it comes to Gallup's water lines, she believes they need significant improvement in order to handle growth and existing needs.

"The issue for me is, we have to have a strong foundation in order to grow business — and that means you have to have strong infrastructure in place," she said. "Nobody is going to want to move to an area where everything is ignored in terms of maintenance."

Lundstrom said GGEDC has not had any real problems when it comes to conversations with businesses on the city's infrastructure.

"We just have to assure people that if it's broken, then it will be fixed," she said.

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NATIONWIDE PROBLEM

When Romero was asked about the number of water line breaks around town recently, he referred the *Sun* to two reports on the issue, *Dawn of the Replacement Era* (2001) and *Buried No Longer*, (2012) released jointly by the American Water Works Association and the EPA.

"The nation, utilities [and] municipalities have not kept up with infrastructure with water utilities, and so now, we're at a point now where we're going to have to either start keeping up with it and getting ahead of the curve, or the cost will be so burdensome that nobody's going to be able to afford it," Romero said.

He was echoing the *Dawn* report, which contends that there was a time when most water pipes were too young to be replaced. But because some are now 100-plus years old, "a new age has arrived" and those pipes will have to be replaced soon. *Buried* issued the same call to action. But instead it focused on what the pipes were made of, when they were used, and their lifespan.

On the question of whether Gallup can keep its utilities up, Romero said the asset management plan and capital outlay funding are two ways the city is trying to do that.

"We're hustling. We're doing our best," he said.

Dawn outlines several recommendations for local governments to enact to protect America's drinking water, including some that Romero discussed with the *Sun*, like the GIS system.

Buried, in part, suggested local utility customers would have to face higher water rates to improve the national water infrastructure.

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Romero also talked about the importance of the infrastructure plan President Joe Biden is promoting.

In his May 6 address, Biden described “a once-in-a-generation investment in America” to “modernize … our water pipes” and “water projects,” including \$56 billion in grants and loans to states to incentivize the modernization of aging water systems.

“Whatever your political beliefs are, that is probably long overdue,” Romero said.

“This a pretty big national investment and the whole idea, as I understand it, is that those [funds] are going to be set aside for local governments to address these issues.”

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