Director gives overview of process, costs

Shortly after Fran Palochak was elected as District 4 councilor in April, she went on a tour of Gallup's wastewater treatment plant.

Little did she know at the time, as she toured the facility, Vince Tovar, director of Gallup Water and Sanitation Department, felt a tinge of shame about the pungent odor coming from the plant that has haunted the westside for countless years.

"When you visited us, I have to admit that it was embarrassing," he said, during the City Council meeting Aug. 11.

But things are better, for now.

Tovar and management company Severn Trent, have engaged in multiple projects to help reduce and eliminate the odor, but it's not cheap. He told councilors that he has cleared the air, so to speak, and crews have begun to process the culprit – odor-causing sludge for transfer that will cost an estimated $257,500.

He used some technical terms to convey how workers process the stinky sludge from holding tanks. Tovar said it has to be the right biological makeup of bacterias and water to process it into a material that can be disposed of at the Thoreau transfer station, so it won't wreck chemical havoc to the landfill.

Since it's a complex procedure, Tovar explained to the council that it's not financially sustainable. The estimated cost of sludge removal has a price tag of $320,000 for fiscal year 2015-16, City Attorney George Kozeliski said.

Tovar said that workers create a cake like substance, which comprises of 20-25 percent sludge and water mixture. Given the high water content, it's costly to transport the heavy mixture to the landfill.

He's calling on the private sector to "propose sustainable sludge management options," as stated in his slideshow presentation he gave councilors. In order to explore private sector offerings, city purchasing will need to send out a Request for Proposals to companies that offer this type of disposal service.

The challenge is to also reduce the build up of sludge through "Proposed Digester Aeration Modifications." These modifications, Tovar's slideshow presentation stated, "Will 'Reduce' volatile portion of sludge and lower landfill transport costs."

But it's not just the wastewater treatment plant that's the cause of the odor.

During a phone interview Aug. 13, Tovar said that crews are in the process of repairing aged and eroded sewer lines by installing PVC piping and new sewer lining to help cut down on the odor that's being perpetuated by a perfect brew of methane and hydrogen sulfate.

It's sulfuric acid, however, that Tovar said is causing the sewer to erode in areas.

The updates and maintenance are expensive, and it's costing the city about $500,000 per year, Tovar said.

Another longterm goal that will cut down expenses, he said, is to reduce the chemicals poured into the waste so healthy bacterias can do their job alone in breaking down the sewage.

"Everything is about the odor," he said. "I am hoping we can reduce or eliminate the chemical input into the system in two to three years."

The city is also in the early planning stages of moving the treatment plant five miles west of its current location. It would likely involve an agreement with the Navajo Nation and be larger in scope compared to the current plant.

It’s something that brought a smile to Palochak’s face during the council meeting, and a sentiment she can pass onto her constituents.

“We’ve done our time,” she said. “It’s time to move it.”