

Federal agency threatens to pull promised water funding

Written by By Holly J. Wagner Sun Correspondent
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City officials are scrambling to get help from federal legislators after the Bureau of Reclamation threatened to go back on \$18 million in funding for water while the Navajo-Gallup Water Supply Project is under construction, and reclassify the city's role in the NGWSP in a way that would force it to pay up front.

The alarming news spurred a trip to Washington, D.C. for Mayor Louie Bonaguidi, councilors Fran Palochak, Dist. 4, and Linda Garcia, Dist. 1, and Assistant City Manager J.M. DeYoung. McKinley County Commissioner Danielle Notah, Dist. 1, and County Manager Anthony Dimas also made the trip.

Washington-based city and county lobbyists arranged for the delegation to meet with Sen. Martin Heinrich, D-N.M., and representatives for Sen. Ben Ray Luján, D- N.M., and Reps. Melanie Stansbury, D-N.M., and Teresa Leger-Fernandez, D-N.M.

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Heinrich's office promised to send a team to Gallup Feb. 22 to meet with local officials. Heinrich's office didn't respond to a request for comment by press time.

"Our backs are against the wall. We told them we're desperate because if we don't have any water, we don't have a city," Garcia said at a recent city council meeting. "This is going to be an enormous financial burden not only on the city, but our citizens as well. I represent a district where most people are on fixed incomes. It's going to be on their backs and there's no way that they are going to be able to pay for this."

The \$18 million is intended to help the city pay for new wells to supply water until the NGWSP – which has been plagued with delays and cost overruns even before the COVID-19 pandemic – is finished. Originally it was supposed to be finished by 2024; now the date looks more like 2030.

The delay forced the city to pursue additional state and federal grants to dig new wells that will tide the city over until the NGWSP starts delivering water from the San Juan River. The city recently finished one new well, its first since 2003, and has enough money for another well and a half at a cost of \$6 million each, Bonaguidi said. But the city may need a few more.

The city has already made significant investments in the NGWSP. Bonaguidi said the city started planning for it 30 years ago. He said the city has already done everything it agreed to do.

"We've already done our reaches and everything that we've promised to do, and that's in the range of \$40 million. We're already supplying water to the outlying chapter houses," Bonaguidi said. "We've done everything we're supposed to do; we're ahead of it. We've got storage tanks and everything."

If the lobbying efforts fail, the city will be forced to rely on well water into the future. That means digging new wells and chasing a dwindling supply of groundwater.

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Separately, the city is also asking the state legislature for \$30 million this year for water infrastructure projects. Past requests have been focused on getting the water itself; the new request is to help replace the city's aging pipes.

When NGWSP construction begins, another problem will arise. The project will likely dislodge scale that has built up from well water in the existing pipes.

"We need to replace about 128 miles of water line underneath our streets," Bonaguidi said.

To make matters more precarious, the city council hasn't been able to agree on a new water rate structure for the city. Until it does, the city is losing money on the water it provides and with no income for the water department, the agency is unable to borrow or bond for money.

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