

City: things returning to normal at Fifth Street and Hill Avenue

Written by By Bernie Dotson Sun Correspondent
Friday, 23 September 2016 03:12



Rare situation creates flooding, displacement

A broken water and sewer line that sent dirty water spewing into the air last week has been repaired, and the situation in the Chihuahuita neighborhood should return to normal by the end of the week.

Dennis Romero, the city's water and sanitation director, said city work crews repaired a break by removing a 12- to 14-inch section of the main and replacing it with a new section of ductile iron pipe and sealing it with clamps.

"We are looking at installing an air relief valve down stream at this point to help manage pressures better," Romero said. "The break at Fifth [Street] and Hill [Avenue] was in a 16-inch ductile iron water main."

Romero said the main was installed in the 1960s, and the break occurred in a weak, corroding section of the line.

"The corrosion, along with the operating pressure, were the causes," he said.

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Romero, who was hired into the top water and sanitation job about three months ago, said the material used in the repair has been in use for more than 50 years, and it's used in new water-system construction, too.

"The splice in the line should work while we look at installing the air relief valve near Mesa Avenue," he said.

On a long-term basis, the city is working with the Navajo Nation, the state of New Mexico, the Bureau of Reclamation, and the Jicarilla Apache Tribe on the design and installation of the near \$1-billion Navajo-Gallup Water Supply Project. When that project is completed, it will bring water from the San Juan River to Gallup and the eastern parts of the Navajo Nation.

"Reach 27.6 of the project is currently under construction, and when completed, it will allow the city to transport water from the Yatahey well-field to the Grandview tank, which is the major function of this 16-inch water main," Romero said.

The reach, Romero said, "will provide for the transmission of water by going around city streets, rather than underneath them."

Four families who live in homes in the affected area were displaced.

According to Romero, the city assisted the families with accommodations in every way possible.

"I do not know the extent of the property damage caused," Romero said. "I can't speak to their insurance company's assessments."

City Attorney George Kozeliski said residents who have been displaced because of events like water breaks may file a claim with the city's risk management department.

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Romero and city crews worked overtime to get the situation back to normal, and local contractors were brought in to assist the city with repairs.

Another Burst

Just as things were getting back to where they should be, another burst along the same main occurred across town along North Ninth Street.

“Another 25-inch-long section of the same 16-inch break cracked slightly near Ninth Street and Lincoln Avenue,” Romero said. “This was likely due to the pressure on the line that built up after isolating the section at Fifth and Hill. The break at Ninth and Lincoln [Avenue] was likely due to corrosion over the years and pressure on the line.”

The water service line near Sky City was impacted for about 30 hours, according to Romero.

“This is because the service line for that area comes off the 16-inch main that was isolated for repairs,” he said.

The 16-inch pipe that supplies water to the city was shut off between 24 and 30 hours in order to repair, disinfect, and test the line before restoring it to service. During that time, water was supplied to the city from the Grandview storage tank, Romero said.

Gallup Councilwoman Fran Palochak, whose council district includes the Fifth and Hill area, said residents in that neighborhood couldn’t understand why water had to be shut off for so long. A Gallup native, Palochak said she’s never seen or heard anything quite like the water from the break, which burst violently into the air.

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“I think we were all in shock that this happened,” Palochak said. “Obviously, we [the city] must take a more proactive stance on this as opposed to a reactive one.”

Valerie Chavez was visiting relatives on nearby Sixth Street when she heard about the water main break.

“It was a scary situation,” Chavez said. “I think what a lot of people want to know is what triggered the break?”

Romero said, during his career, he’s seen similar situations in both municipal and investor-owned water systems. He said the replacement of these water distribution systems is typically worked into utility rates in a sort of financial balancing act.

“The utility [company] wants to make sure that its customers can afford water service, but has to work the cost of maintenance and replacement into its rates,” he said. “This is a nationwide problem.”

***By Bernie Dotson
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