County facing high costs for wastewater treatment compliance

By Jim Holmes, Placer County District 3 supervisor



File photo

Jim Holmes

Local governments across California are facing substantial costs for bringing treatment plants into compliance with the new regulations. Placer County is among those that will be dramatically affected.

Experts estimate local governments have experienced a threefold increase in costs of constructing new sewage treatment plants and upgrading existing plants over the last 10 to 15 years. More stringent regulations are big factors behind the increase, along with inflation and rising costs for materials and labor.

Of course, costs for meeting environmental regulations have been on the rise much longer than that. It has been almost 40 years since President Richard Nixon's administration created the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and requested money from Congress to build municipal wastewater treatment facilities in 1970.

Placer County has made improvements to the Joeger Road plant over the years. Now, the only available options are to substantially reconstruct the plant or construct a pipeline to the Lincoln facility.

We understand this is a difficult time to talk about substantial rate increases, but we have no alternative.

Placer County wants to hear from residents and businesses served by Sewer Maintenance District 1 in North Auburn before making a tough decision about how to meet new wastewater treatment standards.

The county is facing costly improvements to comply with more stringent requirements adopted by state and federal regulators. If the county fails to comply, it could face state fines greater than the improvement costs.

Placer County is considering two options:

Reconstructing the existing Joeger Road wastewater treatment plant in North Auburn to meet the new standards, or

Building a regional pipeline to convey North Auburn's wastewater to the city of Lincoln's modern wastewater treatment plant.

The first option initially would increase sewer fees for residential customers to approximately \$115 per month. It is expected to have smaller up-front costs, but could result in larger rate increases in 10 to 20 years.

Initial fees for the second option are estimated at \$155 per month for residential customers. That option would cost more initially, but is expected to be less expensive in the long run. If the county opts for the second option, the Joeger Road plant will be decommissioned.

Residential customers currently pay \$67.84 per month. Rates for commercial customers vary, based on their service needs. Most customers are billed for sewer service through their annual property tax statements.

Any rate increase likely will be phased in beginning next spring.

The Board of Supervisors has made no decision on which option it prefers, nor is county staff recommending one option over the other at this point. First, we want to hear from the public.

The Facility Services Department is making a concerted effort to get information to ratepayers and is giving them several options for providing input. The outreach effort includes postcards, newspaper advertisements, a radio spot and media briefing.

The public can express its views by:

Attending a public workshop to be held at 7 p.m. Monday, Nov. 17 in the Community Development Resource Agency building. The building is at 3091 County Center Drive in the Placer County Government Center, a complex popularly known as the DeWitt Center. County Center Drive is off of Bell Road between First Avenue and Richardson Drive.

Participating in an online survey at www.placer.ca.gov/ SewerDecision.

Requesting a comment form by calling (530) 889-6846.

In addition, Placer County is planning a random telephone survey for late November. Many, but not all ratepayers will be contacted.

County staff will present a summary of the survey results and public comments to the Board of Supervisors early next year.

We urge ratepayers to take advantage of the opportunity to voice their opinions. They have a lot at stake in the county's decision, and we want to know what they think.

For more information, call (530) 889-6846 or go to Web site www.placer.ca.gov/SewerDecision.

Jim Holmes is Placer County Supervisor for District 3.