

SEWER VOTE CRUCIAL System will change city

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If not for one tragic event in September, 2001 in Lake Havasu City would be remembered as the year of the sewer.

Every local issue seemed to take a back seat to the city's planned sewer expansion, culminating in what has been described as the largest per-capita taxation enacted by voters in Arizona history.

In a landslide, voters approved a \$463 million bond issue to finance a massive sewer expansion.

Despite the fact that three of every four voters eventually checked "Yes," it was by no means an indication of a process that went smoothly.

Throughout the year, the sewer issue took almost every direction imaginable, angering some local residents and prompting others to get involved when they would otherwise remain disinterested.

Although the city's wastewater master plan had been approved a few years earlier, local citizens didn't show much interest until last January when the city revealed approximately how much the project would affect their pocketbooks.

At the time, local citizens seemed less concerned about the cost and more alarmed by what the city had planned.

Hoping to save the city and its residents more than \$200 million in construction costs, the council agreed to move forward with a small-diameter gravity system which would have used existing septic tanks to treat solid waste and transport liquid waste to three treatment plants.

Although the Arizona Department of Environmental Quality approved the alternative system, many local citizens questioned its effectiveness. The small-diameter gravity system had never been used in a community of this size.

The message was clear from an overwhelming majority: "If you have to do it, let's do it right the first time."

A heated public debate between those in favor of the less expensive small-diameter system and a more proven conventional sewer ensued. There was some talk about placing both systems on a ballot, which only added fuel to the fire.

Finally, under heavy public pressure, the Lake Havasu City Council voted 6-1 to call for a bond election that included only a conventional sewer.

But the sewer issue remained in the forefront as opposition to the bond issue appeared to be growing. Some questioned the financing and others expressed concern about the construction plans.

Even the Sept. 11 terrorism attacks managed to enter the picture, as some local citizens wondered if the sewer vote should be delayed until things settled down.

And some of the same people who pushed for a conventional sewer a few months earlier were now saying "Vote No."

But that momentum appeared to shift back in favor of a "Yes" vote after a public meeting with ADEQ Director Jacqueline E. Schafer as the invited guest.

Citing widespread nitrate contamination in the city's groundwater, Schafer warned a large audience that she would take immediate enforcement action if the city did not move forward with its sewer plans. That action, many feared, would have resulted in a building moratorium in a city whose housing boom is the driving force behind the local economy.

Even before Schafer's warning, local Realtors and builders already had started an aggressive campaign for support. Many credited the campaign group for getting the sewer bond passed.

During all that time, the Colorado River Regional Sewer Coalition continued with its pursuit of federal financial assistance. Whether or not that effort will be successful remains unknown.

Although 2001 is now over, the sewer issue will likely continue well into 2002 and beyond. City officials are traveling to New York City in a few weeks to meet with bond insurers and rate agencies. Construction is scheduled to begin next fall.

The expansion will include nearly 800 miles of sewer pipe, 8,700 manholes, 75 pump stations, a new regional treatment facility and upgrades to two existing plants.

"We can always look back at how we handled things, and I'm sure we could have done things better," said Mayor Melanie Grinstead-Hanak a few days before the election. "But right now, I think we have to look at the big picture, and that is protecting our groundwater, the Colorado River and the city's economic vitality for the future."

http://www.havasunews.com/sewer-vote-crucialsystem-will-change-city/article_ef56c416-d904-58b4-a7c2-a5f810f8716a.html

<http://www.lhcaz.gov/brochures/finance/sewerFAQs.pdf>