Smelly Wastewater Plant to Get Makeover

GALLUP, N.M. (AP) — More than likely, most of the folks living in the city's Mentmore neighborhood have experienced "it." Those who haven't, definitely don't want to.

"It" is the smell zone along the north and south sides of West Highway 66, as the highway runs from the Gallup Municipal Airport to Exit 16 off Interstate 40. It's an area dotted with mobile and conventional homes, an apartment complex, hotels and motels, restaurants, gas stations and convenience stores, a cemetery, some automobile repair shops and a truck stop, the latter of which is Gallup's main west side retail draw.

Residents and business owners in the area have long complained about the smell, to no avail.

But on July 1 their prayers could be answered.

On that day, the Fort Washington, Pa.-based Severn Trent Environmental Services, Inc., a renown wastewater treatment plant management firm, takes control of the plant from the city. Severn Trent, whose client list includes hundreds of municipal treatment plants around the world, provides operational services for governments.

Wastewater treatment is the process of removing contaminants from wastewater and household sewage. Its objective is to produce treated effluent and a solid waste or sludge suitable for reuse back into the environment. Talks between the city and Severn Trent began in November 2009.

"It's the right thing for the city at this time," said Gallup Joint Utilities Director Lance Allgood of the takeover. GJU oversees wastewater treatment plant operations, utilities, solid waste and water, providing administrative and technical oversight to the four divisions. "One of the biggest reasons Severn Trent is taking over is because of the city's inability to attract and retain qualified operators," said Allgood.

Over the years, the plant has become known for the foul odor it emits throughout the city's west side and in the heart of the commercial and residential districts. Officials for Severn Trent, in interviews with the Independent, say they are aware of the smell problem and point out that they have in the past operated plants in other cities and towns with similar problems.

Job-wise, one person from Severn Trent is penciled in to assume daily operations at the plant, which has had its share of problems with the federal Environmental Protection Agency and the New Mexico Environment Department. A little more than two years ago, the wastewater treatment plant, whose annual operating budget runs just over $3.2 million, was cited by the two entities for numerous violations associated with the Clean Water Act. Those problems and fines have since been

corrected, and the city, with the new management company, doesn't anticipate going through the kinds of violations again, said Allgood.

"(Severn Trent) will be responsible for the daily operations of the wastewater treatment plant and the collection system lift stations, including applicable environmental permit compliance," Allgood said. "They will conduct an odor and noise assessment within 30 days of taking over operations and improve treatment processes to reduce odors and improve efficiencies."

There has never been a previous contract with any other management company, as Gallup has always operated the wastewater treatment plant itself, noted Allgood. Severn Trent's contract with Gallup runs five years and totals $1.1 million per year with an option to renew at three years and calls for looking after everything from the city's five collection systems, lift stations which collect and shoot solid matter to the plant's entry point, to maintenance, legal compliance and fines and staffing.

Noting that the city spent a lot of time and research looking at other wastewater treatment plant management firms, besides just Severn Trent, Allgood noted Severn's "outstanding resume, technical expertise and efficiency" in plant operations.

That reasoning led the Gallup City Council to unanimously approve Severn Trent's 50-plus page contract at its May 25 regular meeting.

Built in 1955, the plant handles more than 800,000 gallons of treated water on a daily basis.

"It's a wastewater plant so you're going to have somewhat of a smell," cautioned Allgood, GJU director since 2004. "You can never get rid of the smell totally," he said, pointing out that machines break down and that the speed and strength of the wind are big factors that contribute to the pervasiveness of the smell.

The smell has become something of a political football with residents and business owners out west, who argue that elected officials have ignored their complaints. Past and present mayors have tried to downplay the problem, with current Gallup Mayor Harry Mendoza saying in past interviews with the Independent, that the bad smell comes from "P-traps" within the home plumbing mechanisms of city residents who live in Mentmore. As water empties from a sink or bathtub of a residence, it goes through a "P-trap" and onto a drain line and then ends up in the city's sewer system. It's the traps that cause the problem — and not the actual wastewater treatment plant, suggested Mendoza in the Independent interview.

Former Gallup Mayor George Galanis believes the plant's problems relate to personnel matters and outright neglect. Galanis was mayor of Gallup from 1991 to 1999 and was also part-owner of the now-closed Ranch Kitchen, a restaurant which sits at 3001 W. Highway 66 and directly across the highway from the wastewater plant. During his years as mayor and while working at the restaurant, Galanis said the plant's odor was "bad at times," clarifying that it had nothing to do with the restaurant closing about a year ago.

"I never met a sewer plant that smelled like perfume," joked Galanis. "You're going to always have a smell. What's important is how you maintain it."

The plant is part of Gallup Vice Mayor's John "Jay" Azua's council district. He said hiring Severn Trent "was one of our best options." Azua, elected to the city council last year, lauded the background of Severn Trent, saying the periodic bad "smell" has been an ongoing thing years before he was elected. "You always have to be aware of the capacity of the plant," said Azua. "I'm talking payday weekends, holidays — particularly when there are large amounts of people in the city.I feel good about the new firm.But I don't know about completely eliminating the odor."

Nick Digiallonardo operates Olympic Kitchen, a popular west side restaurant located a few miles from the plant. He said some people have come into the restaurant "holding their noses" because of the smell.But, he said he's optimistic that something positive will come out of the new management firm taking control of the plant.

"If you step outside, the smell is horrible," said Digiallonardo when the fumes circulate. Digiallonardo said he's operated Olympic Kitchen since 2002."After you smell that awful smell, who'd want to come back? Certainly not tourists," he commented, noting that a lot of Olympic Kitchen's clientele is hotel and motel traffic coming off the interstate and looking for a good meal.Of the new firm, Digiallonardo said he hopes "they fix it and find out what the problem is." There are six current full-time employees who work at the Gallup wastewater treatment plant, and Severn Trent will offer employment to each one of them, said Ed Schwab, director of client relations for the company. The jobs at the plant include those of a lab technician, an assistant plant supervisor and four treatment plant and lift station operators.

Allgood told council members at the May 25 meeting that if the plant's existing employees aren't interested in working for Severn Trent, then those employees would have seniority in applying for other vacant city jobs, which is in accordance with the city's union contract with the United Mine Workers of America Local 1629.

"If the affected employees are not hired in other city positions by (July 1), the employees would be laid off and placed on a list for consideration for other city jobs," Allgood told council members at the city council meeting.

The new cost to operate the plant will be about the same as what it presently cost us to operate the plant and lift stations, said Allgood.

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