

insight**Las Vegas  SUN**

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Our \$60 Million Tidy Bowl

Clark County has a new white elephant on its hands in the form of the Advanced Wastewater Treatment plant.

Maybe a better name for what has been dubbed a \$60 million marvel of bureaucratic inefficiency would be Southern Nevada's Tidy Bowl.

The Clark County Sanitation District faces a vote on a proposed 62 percent increase in sewer rates — about \$4 a month above present rates — to pay for operating AWT.

A Bailing Bucket

After eight years of political water fights, the county defends its new wastewater treatment system as a bailing bucket for the existing plant, with a 32 million-gallon-a-day treatment capacity, amid state threats to stop local construction.

Use of the plant is "absolutely essential" to meet anticipated flows of more than 40 million gallons daily in July, August and September, district director Jim Gans claims.

"There are flows out there that we have to meet. We can't just cut off a valve," he says.

The AWT can meet any treatment standards decided upon by state environmentalists at a meeting in June, Gans says.

Mothballing Suggested

Last month the county heard from the Nevada Resort Association, which hired a consultant to check the proposed rates, especially for thousands of hotel rooms at Strip resorts facing gigantic sewer rate increases.

NRA scientists termed the rates "unfair," at best. They suggested mothballing the AWT for at least five years, providing a monthly or bi-monthly customer payment plan to ease the crunch on fixed-income families and using cheaper chemicals to treat the wastewater.

None of those suggestions are new. In fact, the city of Las Vegas and the county are in court over one of the most studied bodies of water in the country — Lake Mead — and the water quality that led to AWT.

During the late 1960s, algae in Lake Mead became a nuisance, covering boats, swimmers and the shoreline with its blue-green film.

Design Flunks Test

Since the worst clumps appeared at the mouth of Las Vegas Wash, samples taken there found phosphates from the sewage discharges were the culprits. Scientists saw no end in sight, so recommended phosphate removal by building an AWT.

Surprise. The algae disappeared from the lake during AWT construction and its waters have remained clear. One theory suggests Lake Powell's impoundment in the 1960s caused a drop in water level at Mead, creating a welcome place for algae.

A 1980 General Accounting Office report, investigating the nation's Tidy Bowl projects, noted the 60 million-gallon-a-day flow of wastewater through Las Vegas Wash area into Lake Mead's six trillion gallons of water equals a one-ounce jigger of water flowing each day into a 240-gallon moving pond.

Classic Example

"The investigative staff believes this is a classic example of EPA requiring local communities to construct AWT facilities without clear evidence," the report states.

The GAO notes there was no definition of pollution problems, or an efficient and economical treatment program.

It is claimed the AWT will not operate for what it was designed to do — remove phosphorous from the lake. Gans disagrees.

What all this means is the county could get stuck for at least \$42 million in federal funds that EPA could demand immediately if the plant does not go into operation.

County officials say the feds could slap a moratorium on all construction in Southern Nevada if the AWT fails to start pumping sewage. In other words, the plant is insurance to keep Las Vegas growing.

But why can't the county wait until after June, when the state will set water quality standards, until the county sets up a billing system to ease the crunch on homeowners' pocketbooks and until the plant operators find cheaper ways to treat the waters?

When the county tidies up its own bowl and treats its customers reasonably, sewer customers will be ready to pay the price.