

Water lines needed, but are there other ways to fund them?

Staff Writer

There are some 100 miles of old water lines beneath a city growing by leaps and bounds. Some 100 miles of water lines that will have to be replaced — many of them sooner than later. Ever-increasing maintenance costs of the water and wastewater system in the city of Farmington have generated a lot of discussion lately. The Farmington City Council has debated at length whether or not to increase the cost for water and wastewater services for the first time in 14 years.

Under the proposed rate hike, which will be paid over five years, the average residential customer using less than 7,000 gallons of water a month will be charged a \$3.15 per month "renewal and replacement" fee, plus an additional \$2.35 per month for wastewater. The fee then increases about \$1 per year over a five-year span, which would nearly double the average utility bill to \$61.06 by 2011. The fee, city officials said, will generate an estimated \$13.78 million in additional revenue by 2011.

We understand the need to improve aging and deteriorating water lines. We know the city can't wait much longer to replace some of those old lines, and we know many Farmington residents aren't crazy about a utility hike.

"I received, and I know everyone else did as well, a slew of phone calls. Not one of those phone calls was in support of a rate increase," Councilor George Sharpe said.

City Councilor Mary Fischer has been opposed to the rate hike since the subject was raised. Fischer has argued that city officials have not looked at alternative funding sources such as state and federal money, instead of raising fees to city residents.

Jason Sandel, another member of the City Council, recommended a recalculation of the rate structure after one-time expenditures are removed from a projection of the needed funding. He says that strategy would ease the rate increase on customers.

"Going to the taxpayers ... just isn't the judicious approach," Sandel said, noting that city officials should then determine what the city needs in the future.

Planning is critical to the success of any business — and every community. Planning today for the water and wastewater needs of the future is important and should be done. City officials need to make sure the infrastructure of our community is sufficient to handle what we are certain is to be continuing growth.

While we recognize the need to replace and improve the city's water lines, we would hope the city council will continue to explore alternate ways of funding those lines. We would encourage the council to research federal and state resources to help pay for the needed repairs and replacement.

Citizens rarely embrace rate hikes. Whether the hike is administered right away or spread out over a matter of years, it remains an increase in utility rates. Mayor Bill Standley said the upgrades to the city's water and wastewater system is a matter of public safety. Extended, larger, high-pressure waterlines are needed for future development and for new fire stations, to ensure the safety of city residents.

"We can't get our arms around it without money," the mayor said.

No, we can't. But we can take the time to research other avenues that might provide the necessary funding.

The city hasn't increased utility rates in 14 years. Another month of research into alternative funding options isn't likely to create an emergency.