

‘We need a lifeline’: Helmsburg sewer district asks for \$175K

By Courtney H ughett Brown County Democrat

The Helmsburg Regional Sewer District asked the Brown County Council on Monday night, July 20, for \$175,000 to connect 10 more homes to its sewer system, saying the money could help keep customer rates from going up again while the district works to replace its aging treatment plant.

Adrian O’Shea, president of the Helmsburg Regional Sewer District, said the district is trying to move forward with a new sewer plant, but bids for the project came in about \$1.7 million over budget. The district has gone back to the drawing board to remove some items and bring the cost down before rebidding the project. At the same time, Helmsburg sewer customers are already facing a rate increase. O’Shea said the monthly sewer rate recently went from \$92.50 to \$118.

That new rate was calculated with the understanding that 10 additional customers would be added to the system. “That was hard to swallow as it is,” O’Shea said.

He said if the 10 customers are not added, the district may have to look at rates again. “We need a lifeline,” O’Shea said. “If we can’t get these 10 customers in, we may have to raise rates again. I don’t want to do that.”

O’Shea appeared with Kyle Myers of the Helmsburg Regional Sewer District. They said the \$175,000 would not pay to extend the main sewer line because that work has already been done. Instead, the money would pay for the equipment and work needed to connect the 10 individual properties to the sewer main, including grinder stations, sewer lines and labor.

Myers said the sewer main has already been extended south along Helmsburg Road under Bean Blossom Creek to serve several homes. The main has also been extended north from Helmsburg Elementary School around Oak Ridge Road, stopping before Railroad Road.

All 10 property owners have already signed easements, O’Shea and Myers said. Some are waiting to build new homes, while others have septic systems that are already failing. “I’ve got a few others that are actually in desperate need of it because their septic system has been in failure for quite some time,” Myers said.

The possible funding source discussed most was the county-held “sock factory” money. Council members said about \$228,000 remains in that fund, which has been discussed for years. “Sock factory money would be great, but if not I don’t care where it comes from,” O’Shea said.

No final decision was made Monday night. Council members said they want more information first, including the sewer district’s recent audit and financial records. Council member Judy Swift Powdrill said she wants to see those documents before voting to give money to an entity outside direct county government. “Before we start throwing money at entities that are not really county government, I’d like to see their financials,” Swift Powdrill said. “I’d like to see their last audit.”

O’Shea and Myers said they would provide whatever information the council requests. Myers said the district recently completed an audit, with a closing meeting held at the end of June. He also said the district could provide the report from its rate consultant.

Swift Powdrill said she was not necessarily against the request, but believed the council needed to do its homework. “I think it’s good stewardship of money to see those types of things,” she said.

Council President Darren Byrd said the sock factory money could be a good fit because the money was meant to benefit the Helmsburg area. He said the fund has sat unused for many years. “We have argued for a decade, over a decade, I don’t know how many years it’s been, of you know the sock factory money, what it’s used for, what it’s going to benefit, and right now we have an opportunity for it to benefit the people who were impacted by the sock factory leaving,” he said.

Council member Scott Rudd said the money may have other possible uses, including The STEAMery in Helmsburg and Parks and Recreation. He also said his understanding was that the original donor wanted the money to go toward some kind of community facility named after her son. “I’m not sure 10 sewer connections meets that,” he said.

He also questioned whether the county should spend about \$17,500 per customer if some of those homes could instead use septic systems. O’Shea responded that many of the properties are small and do not have enough room for new septic systems.

Council members also asked whether the homeowners would pay any part of the connection cost. Myers said not under the current arrangement. He said the district had negotiated with property owners for easements as part of the original State Revolving Fund project, with the understanding that the hookup would be paid for through that project.

The discussion also made clear how difficult the financial picture is for a small sewer district. Helmsburg currently has 64 customers, including two commercial customers. O’Shea and Myers said the district’s current plant is 30 years old, even though plants like it generally have a life expectancy of about 20 to 25 years. “I will say, our treatment plant is on a lifeline right now,” Myers said. “We are throwing Band-Aids and duct tape on it almost by the week at this point in time, trying to keep it going until we can get this new plant.”

Myers said the district recently paid off a line of credit and is essentially debt-free, but the higher monthly rate is needed to pay regular bills, maintain the current system and build up money for pump replacements and repairs.

The district’s planned new plant would be built to handle 14,000 gallons per day. The current system averages about 6,000 to 7,000 gallons per day, Myers said. Adding the 10 customers would likely bring that to about 7,000 to 8,000 gallons per day. The plant would be built so it could be expanded later if more customers are added.

Myers said the district has been awarded about \$6.6 million in grant or forgivable loan funding through the State Revolving Fund program. When bids and nonconstruction costs were added together, he said the project was around \$8 million. The district is working with its engineering firm to bring the project down to the amount of grant funding available. Taking a regular loan for the difference would increase customer rates, he said.

The goal is to rebid the treatment plant project in the next couple of months, close with SRF by the end of the year and begin construction in spring 2027. The 10 home connections could happen sooner if funding is secured.

The request also brought up the ongoing tension between the Helmsburg Regional Sewer District and the Brown County Regional Sewer District. The Brown County district was not at the meeting, and Council President Byrd said he did not want to go too far into disputes between the two boards when only one side was present. But council members did talk about the importance of the sewer districts working together, especially because state agencies and funding sources may be watching.

Council member Gary Huett said he worries that agencies such as the Indiana Department of Environmental Management or SRF could become concerned if local sewer districts appear unable to work together. “We don’t want power trips,” he said. “We don’t need egos. We want to serve the people.”

O'Shea said he and members of the Brown County Regional Sewer District have been meeting and talking through difficult issues. "There's a lot of emotion on both sides," O'Shea said. "And it's not that we don't want what's best for the area. We have a difference of how we can get there." He said those conversations are still happening. "There's not a power struggle here," O'Shea said. "We are just trying to help the people that are asking for it."

President Byrd, who said he has attended some of the discussions between representatives of the two sewer boards, said the conflict is not new and was not created by the current members. "The conversation between the two boards has been contentious for years," he said. "What Kyle and Adrian are walking into is not something they have started. It's something they've inherited."

He said he believes there has been progress. "I see forward movement here and agreements coming together, and I hope that we can help them to resolve the issues," he said.

Council member Jim Kemp used the sewer discussion to make a larger point about Brown County's future. He said the county cannot talk seriously about affordable housing, economic development or the comprehensive plan without also dealing with sewer infrastructure. "Until we get serious about the infrastructure and address this infrastructure issue, then you know, let's just stop talking about it because it's just absolutely a waste of time," Kemp said.

Kemp said he believes Brown County eventually needs one wastewater utility company, similar to Brown County Water, instead of several sewer districts operating separately. "We are one county," Kemp said.

He said Brown County has discussed sewer and infrastructure needs for years without enough progress. "Let's get some stuff done, let's get some stuff accomplished," Kemp said.

Council members said the Helmsburg district should next take the request to the Brown County Commissioners, because the commissioners would have to be involved if sock factory money is used. The commissioners' next meeting is Aug. 5, and the council's next work session is Aug. 6.

Council members said the district should also provide the audit and financial information requested by Swift Powdrill. Several members appeared open to continuing the discussion, but said they were not ready to promise money Monday night.

O'Shea said he appreciated the council's interest in moving quickly, but said the district understands if more time is needed. "I will say, I appreciate how fast you're trying to push this through," O'Shea said. "But I'm not going to stand here and say that I expect you guys to do this."

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