



This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only.

GJ sewer fees to rise in 2013, next few years

By Duffy Hayes

Friday, December 7, 2012

It's been a few years since customers of the Persigo Wastewater Treatment Plant have seen their monthly bills rise, but plans for each of the next three years call for a boost in customer fees.

A budget adopted this week for 2013 includes a \$2.02 rise for basic, minimal-use sewer and wastewater treatment service for Persigo customers, increasing the total monthly service to \$17. According to the plan, rates are set to jump \$2 in 2014 and \$1.75 in 2015.

Mesa County commissioners, who have joint oversight over the wastewater plant with the Grand Junction City Council, heard a number of reasons for the planned rate increases.

Grand Junction City Services Manager Dan Tonello presented a budget for next year that includes a roughly 3 percent increase in operations expenses and a capital plan that is jumping from \$2.29 million in 2012 to \$4.22 million in 2013.

A big part of the additional expense is to replace aging infrastructure in the system's collection network. Tonello said 217 miles of the roughly 500 miles of pipe in the system are at "life expectancy" and "beyond their design life."

"We need to increase the frequency with which we are replacing that — or essentially, 10 or 20 years down the road, we could have a very old system in need of drastic repairs," Tonello told county commissioners.

Persigo plans to hire two new full-time employees next year. One is expected to help maintain and repair the current system. Another is expected to help serve the Central Grand Valley Sanitation District, which Persigo now manages after a November vote that dissolved the special district.

Also, because there have been no rate increases during the recent economic downturn, Persigo fund balances have decreased, and Tonello said the rate increases will keep those balances above minimally acceptable levels.

Finally, regulations that will require new measurement of nutrients are looming. About \$500,000 is being set aside next year to prepare for those regulations, and Persigo hopes to have \$11 million collected by 2023 to comply with the new, as-of-yet unspecified standards.

"I'm not real happy about the increase in fees, but I do understand the challenges with capital and maintaining the infrastructure, and I do know that we have one of the smallest monthly fees compared to any other sewer funds," Commissioner Janet Rowland said.

Despite the fee increases, Persigo customers still enjoy the lowest rates on the Western Slope for sewer service. Staff attribute the low fees to federal participation in Persigo's construction in the 1980s and the lack of a debt

payment for the plant.

Looking beyond 2015, the long-range budget projections show no increase in fees in 2016 and 2017, and 50-cent increases planned for 2018, 2019 and 2020. Tonello cautioned that these are very preliminary projections for these years and “when we actually get there, things could be very different.”