

Sawmills flushes sewer expansion

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A shed behind Joey Boozer's house in Sawmills shows water damage from sitting in a puddle of waste from the failing septic field.

The puddle of sewage in Joey Boozer's backyard started out small. Human waste and used water seeped out from his septic tank and pooled behind the small, gray wooden shed behind his house on Rockview Place in Sawmills.

In September, that puddle grew to span nearly half his backyard, and he's been dealing with the fallout ever since: He can't mow his lawn, his dogs can't go back there, and a rotten, humid stench surrounds the muddy ground.

“And now that it’s summer there will be mosquitoes and the smell will get worse,” Boozer said, sweating under the beating sun next to the ever-growing sewage swamp.

For a few weeks, he had hope a solution was coming. The Town of Sawmills was planning a sewer system expansion that would bring town sewer lines to Boozer’s house, along with about 60 others in the area, which includes the Virginia Acres neighborhood.

But three weeks ago, the Sawmills Town Council voted to put the project on hold once again, as they did in 2017, and Tuesday night in a 3-2 vote the council stopped the project altogether.

Boozer said he’s disappointed to see the town cancel the project, as it means his tank will have to be pumped and possibly replaced.

“(My landlord) will have to do something about it now, we can’t keep living with this,” he said.

The town has already spent at least \$35,000 on planning and surveying for the project. A \$2.3 million, zero-interest state loan would have funded the project. The state pre-approved the loan, and offered forgiveness of 25 percent, meaning the town would have to pay back only \$1.725 million.

After several work sessions and a public forum, council members Rebecca Johnson, Clay Wilson and Keith Warren voted in favor of scrapping the project completely, mostly because of the project's high cost, which was expected to increase sewer rates, and because of several people voicing opposition at public meetings on the project.

Brad Haas, a resident of Virginia Acres, was one who came to Tuesday’s meeting to speak out against the project.

“I personally am not a fan of the project, and there are a lot of people in Virginia Acres that are also opposed, and I ask that their voices be heard,” he said.

Mayor Johnnie Greene, who does not vote except in case of a tie, said that dropping the project is a mistake, and a missed opportunity.

“This project will probably not come this way again, ... and I think it’s a tragedy,” Greene said. “In the past 20 years I’ve lived here ... the different councils have sat on their hands and not done anything for the people of Sawmills. They want to keep taxes and rates low, ... but only a third of the town has sewer. The whole town should be covered.”

Council members Jeff Wilson and Joe Norman, who voted against abandoning the sewer expansion, agreed with Greene.

The project would have raised sewer rates about 21 percent over the next three years, and possibly more beyond that. At past meetings, Johnson said she couldn’t justify raising other people’s rates and spending millions of dollars to help a small number of people.

In the area where the sewer line would have reached, 29 homes have failing septic tanks. Fifteen of those would have been connected to the line, including Boozer’s.

“The surveyors said mine was one of the worst houses, near condemnation,” he said.

Failing septic fields like Boozer’s affect more than just his family. The neighbors in the house behind Boozer’s septic tank smell the leak every day and have reported it to the health department. And now that there’s no chance for a sewer connection, Boozer’s landlord will have to get the tank in compliance.

In the meantime, inspectors with the Caldwell County Health Department suggested Boozer and his family use less water, wash their clothes less regularly and conserve water while washing dishes, which Boozer was adamantly opposed to.

“This isn’t our fault,” he said. “We’ve dealt with a lot of demons, and sewage is one of them.”

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