

Sheboygan's \$35 million water system project will prevent 'catastrophic failure' but raise rates

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SHEBOYGAN - An estimated \$35 million overhaul of Sheboygan's water intake system is expected to raise residents' water bills, though by how much has yet to be determined.

The longer the city waits to replace critical parts of the system, "costs are only going to increase and the risk of a catastrophic failure goes up as these pieces of infrastructure age," Joe Trueblood, superintendent of the Water Utility, told the City Council during a meeting last month.

Trueblood said the city doesn't have any neighboring water utilities big enough to back it up if the system failed.

"The time is here to replace them," he said.

Operating entirely on water revenues, the Sheboygan Water Utility provides all the water for the city of Sheboygan and sells water to Sheboygan Falls and Kohler.

Trueblood shared a timeline for the project during the meeting, indicating the final design of the project is underway and should be completed in June. In the spring, the Water Utility will seek construction authorization from the Wisconsin Public Service Commission. Bidding is slated for late 2021, followed by final approval on the funding package from the Board of Waterworks Commissioners and the City Council. Construction could begin as early as 2022.

Plans include a new water intake pipeline, shore well and low lift pumping station, which pumps raw, untreated, water to the plant. A shorter emergency pipeline about 2,000 feet into the lake is also possible, but will depend on how affordable that is, Trueblood said during the meeting. The emergency pipeline could be extended into a full pipeline in the future. The new system should have a lifetime of 100 years.

Two intake pipelines supply Sheboygan with all of its water — as well as Sheboygan Falls and Kohler, which are wholesale customers of the city's Water Utility.

One, a 36-inch pipe, was installed in 1959. The other, a 30-inch pipe, dates back to 1909. Trueblood explained the problems with the current system: The 30-inch pipe wouldn't be able to support the water system if the other failed; both the 30-inch pipe and the shore well have exceeded their working lifetimes; both pipelines are at risk of icing, and the 36-inch pipe doesn't go far enough out into the lake to prevent icing and avoid runoff.

Additionally, the low lift pumps are at or below Lake Michigan's water level, increasing the chance of flooding.

A new pipe will run 6,000 feet out into Lake Michigan, farther than the existing pipelines at 2,100 and 5,100 feet, and will have a capacity of 36 million gallons of water a day.

Going out that far into the lake puts the end of the pipe farther away from runoff from the Pidgeon and Sheboygan Rivers and reduces the potential for freezing, Trueblood told the council.

The 36-inch pipe would be kept in service as a backup, Trueblood said in an email.

"This project has really been formative for many, many years," Trueblood said, noting that the utility got an easement from the city in 2004 for a new intake facility just north of the Water Utility building and east of Vollrath Park.



Financing options for the project are still being explored, with the state's Safe Drinking Water Loans Program, private market water revenue bonds and FEMA Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities grants as possibilities. Regardless of how the project is funded, it won't have an impact on the city budget or property taxes, since all Water Utility debt is paid by water revenues.

Financing will likely result in a 30 to 40 year package. To cover the annual debt service of \$1.6 to \$2 million, the Water Utility will need a 22% increase in revenue.

Trueblood said in an email that he doesn't expect water rates to increase by that much for a few reasons: With vacancies in the Southpointe Enterprise Campus "We are hopeful that additional water users will be added in the coming years, and this will help increase revenues apart from rate increases." The Board of Waterworks Commissioners is also committed to spreading out rate increases as much as possible, he said.

The Water Utility is also applying for the FEMA BRIC grant to cover \$2.6 million of the project, which is how much it will cost to secure the shoreline by where the new system will be, and is continuing to look for ways to reduce cost during the design period.

Since the new site will be 10-15 feet from the lake, Trueblood said in an interview the high water level is being factored into the design.

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