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Outage underscores need for planned system upgrade

By Andrew Oxford

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In Tuesday's (Sept. 23) Taos Town Council meeting, municipal leaders passed around an elbow from a pipe buried beneath a parking lot near the intersection of Paseo del Pueblo Sur and Camino de la Placita.

It was one part of the plumbing problems that left much of the town without water service the evening of Sept. 18 and the morning of Sept. 19.

As town officials plan for upgrades that could prevent such outages in the future and devise stronger contingency plans for when they do occur, the piece of pipe illustrated the challenges posed by an aging water system.

The recent outage began beneath Cruz Alta Road on Sept. 18 when an 18-inch section of a concrete storm drain pipe collapsed onto a water main. The collapse was prompted, town officials said, by heavy and prolonged rains that undermined the storm water and sanitary sewer line.

The concrete drain crushed a 12-inch section of the water line, disrupting service to a town-wide system fed by storage tanks east of the municipality.

When pressure in the system dropped, a computerized system kicked into action.

Pressure was ratcheted up in other parts of the system to compensate, causing what town officials said were several small ruptures in older pipes not owned by the town but tied to the water system. Crews worked through the night to contain the leaks and pressure was restored to the system for several hours after midnight Sept. 19.

"The only mistake that happened is that when I went to bed at 2 a.m., we thought everything was taken care of," Taos Town Manager Rick Bellis said.

But pressure dropped again later in the morning due to a rupture in the elbow public works director Francisco Espinoza presented at Tuesday's council meeting.

"What I was trying to convey to the council is we didn't know that line existed," Espinoza said Wednesday (Sept. 24), noting the ruptured line was not owned by the town but "somehow, somewhere" connected to its system.

Such forgotten pipes are not common but have been found before in the historic district, he said, explaining town crews have made an effort to trace and replace similar older lines.

In what Bellis noted as an irony, both the computerized water monitoring system and the area of the original failure were identified only days earlier as priorities for infrastructure improvements.

An upgrade to the town's water monitoring system that would allow town staff to better identify and isolate leaks is already in the works but is likely one year from implementation, Bellis indicated.

"There's really no way for us to realistically say 'lets tear up and examine every pipe in the system,' Part of the problem is the system is so old," he said, noting some of the problems last week stemmed from plumbing not owned by the town or charted on any of its maps. "It's really about being able to better monitor the system. It could allow us to isolate a leak."

Town officials will also devise stronger contingency plans for managing disruptions in water service, Bellis said.

Schools closed

When the rupture Sept. 19 was discovered and the problem's scope determined, school officials had already planned on opening campuses as normal. Buses were already on their routes.

When water service was not restored, school officials announced they would dismiss classes at Taos High School, Taos Middle School, Enos Garc'a Elementary School, Vista Grande High School and Taos Cyber Magnet School. Ranchos Elementary School and Arroyos del Norte Elementary School were not affected.

The continued outage shut bathrooms and prompted the closure of Taos County's administrative offices, courts and senior program. Kit Carson Electric Cooperative also closed its headquarters.

Water service to Holy Cross Hospital was not disrupted and town officials maintained public safety was not compromised.

No contamination reported

Locally based personnel from the New Mexico Environment Department, which monitors water quality, noted the service disruption Friday morning, according to a spokesperson for the agency.

The department recommended town officials issue an advisory calling on residents to boil their water, spokesperson Jim Winchester wrote in an email to *The Taos News* Sept. 19.

No such advisory was issued.

Winchester said town officials informed the department crews were nearly finished with repairs and intended to flush the lines to disinfect the system.

Town officials maintain the potable water system was not compromised and that no contaminants entered the public distribution system.

Making do

Restaurants and businesses around town struggled to make do amid the outage.

At Tuesday's town council meeting, Bellis said it was still not clear how many people had been impacted or how much the outage might have cost.

During the disruption in service, municipal leaders visited hotels throughout town distributing information. The Youth and Family Center offered free access to showers for residents as well as tourists.

At Michael's Kitchen on Paseo del Pueblo Norte, waitresses were serving up coffee made with water from an employee's well.

"It's going back to the oldschool ways," owner Gina Apodaca said.

Stella McGinnis, a hairdresser dining at the restaurant, said three clients canceled appointments due to the disruption in water service.

"Without the water, you can't do anything," she said.



Katharine Egli

Dennis Martinez, of the town of Taos Public Works Department, works at a waterline break beneath Cruz Alta Road on Friday (Sept 19).