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Town water outage may have ties to findings in 2007 report

By J.R. Logan

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A widespread water outage that affected much of the town last month could have been mitigated by enacting repairs and upgrades highlighted in a report published seven years ago.

According to Taos Town Manager Rick Bellis, a concrete storm drain collapsed Sept. 18 onto a 12-inch water line off Cruz Alta Road, causing a drop in water pressure. A computerized system that controls water pressure then over-compensated for the low pressure, causing older pipes to burst in other areas and spreading the effects of the outage.

The town's water system has isolation valves meant to control water pressure to prevent this kind of wide-spread outage, and town officials acknowledge that a break in one part of the system should not have impacted customers on the other side of town.

It was a point Taos Town Councilor Fred Peralta made at a meeting Sept. 23. "I can't understand why the Weimer area was out of water with that leak on Cruz Alta," Peralta said.

Public works director Francisco "French" Espinoza responded that his department was still trying to determine why the outage affected so many people, but it appears at least part of the problem is linked to issues raised in a 2007 study obtained by *The Taos News*.

That study, authored by Albuquerque engineering firm Souder, Miller and Associates, pointed to several problems with how pressure is managed throughout the town's water system. The report can be found with this story at taosnews.com.

According to the report, the computer program meant to automatically control pressure gets inconsistent signals from flow meters throughout the system, which could lead to operational and maintenance problems.

Espinoza told *The Taos News* Wednesday (Oct. 1) said the current system needs upgrades. "It works, but it doesn't work the way it needs to," Espinoza said.

The 2007 report also found that multiple pressure-reducing valves "have been bypassed and therefore have become ineffective." The report concluded that the situation was causing water to "back-feed" from a half-million gallon tank above the Weimer neighborhood to a million-gallon tank near Holy Cross Hospital. About 600,000 gallons per day were being cycled from one tank to the other — about 10 times the amount of water consumed by the Weimer Foothills area — causing unnecessary energy expense as water was repeatedly pumped up the hill.

The report pointed out that three of the bypassed valves dictate pressure throughout the rest of the system.

Seven years after the report was finished, the town is only now beginning the first of a two-phase project meant to resolve these issues.

Last year, the New Mexico Water Trust Board awarded the town a \$2 million grant to extend water service to the Weimer Foothills neighborhood. An engineering contract with Souder, Miller and Associates was signed July 1, and Espinoza said the project is set to go to bid in the coming weeks.

The second phase of that project — which won't begin until next year at the earliest — is intended to address problems with the computer system and pressure control valves.

While Espinoza said those will be welcome fixes, he said the bigger problem is going to be finding and replacing aging water lines like those that burst a couple weeks ago. "The real issue is that we discovered a line we didn't know existed," Espinoza said, adding that it was so deteriorated that he wouldn't be surprised if it burst again.