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Local/Regio

Aging pipes slow waste flow

Officials at loss for solution to nighttime sewage odor

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It is afternoon in Grand Junction, and the air is fairly clean and clear.

But as the afternoon fades to evening, the foul smell of raw sewage blankets the downtown area.

In some cities, that heavy smell might have the entire city population up in arms. Here, residents may not like the smell, but they have learned to live with it.

It's not a new problem, but it is a problem: the city's sewage treatment plant creates the odor as it strains to process the constant flow of septic waste from Grand Junction's homes.

And try as they might, city officials say that nothing has worked to solve the odor problem.

"In the last 10 years, we've tried just about every approach to this," said Jim Patterson, city public works director. "We've tried just about everything. We've had experts and Ph.Ds in here trying to help, and they haven't come up with anything."

Depending on the season, the smell can drift from the sewage treatment plant on the Colorado River to the Redlands or as far north as Pomona School. Most of the time, it is particularly bad just east of the plant, at First Street and Grand Avenue.

"We do a lot of explaining because people always come in and ask what it is," says Jim Holmes, owner of Surplus City USA, a discount store at First and Grand. "It's so bad — it goes for three and four days in a row."

"I'm just glad I'm not in the food business. The smell makes some people just plain sick."

One person who is in the food business, Scott Howard, owner of Dos Hombres Restaurant at 2516 Broadway, says his business has been hurt by the smell.

"It just stinks," he said. "I've heard a lot of complaints ... but I think everybody realizes that not much can be done."

Another business — the Gasamat gas station — also gets hit with heavy odor.

"One thing I know is that you never get used to it," says Dorothy Ingram, who runs the station. "I've been here eight years and it's been here as long as I have."

Like others in the area, Ingram says this time of year is worst for the stench. Aside from the overpowering smell itself, Ingram says she's forced to turn off the air conditioning because the coolers suck in the smelly air.

"The only thing we try to do is turn off the air conditioning before it gets too bad," she says. "Once it gets inside, you can't ever get it out."

"It comes right into our swamp cooler," agrees Joan Hei-

lig, owner of Redlands Liquors, 2516 Broadway. "We turn off the cooler, but it comes in when anyone opens the door."

The smell can carry as far away as Paradise Valley Mobile Home Park on 25.5 Road to the north where some residents have complained of getting sick from the odor, manager Ray McCollom says.

"It doesn't happen very often, but it does come through this way," he said. "It doesn't take you very long to figure out that there's something wrong with the sewer system."

But because the smell has plagued the city off and on for the last 10 years, residents have become somewhat used to it, and complaints have lessened.

Health officials report receiving few complaints about the strong smell even though some people say it is worse than ever.

"I think most people are used to it," says John Blair, of the state Health Department. "We hardly get a call on anymore."

"We have not had what I would consider a lot of complaints — maybe two a month," said Tom Douville, director of environmental health for Mesa County.

Contrary to what many people think, the smell is not created by the city's sewage treatment plant, which was built in 1936 has been upgraded twice since. City officials say the plant operates very efficiently.

The problem stems from the pipes that collect the sewage and take it to the plant, Public Works Director Jim Patterson said. The pipes are old — some have been underground for close to 100 years, officials say — and can't carry the sewage to the plant very quickly.

By the time it gets to the plant, it has begun to decompose, Patterson said.

By day, the odor rises above the city and festers in a large cloud of fumes. When evening comes and the air begins to cool, it swoops down on the city, pushed by wind from the Colorado National Monument.

"As far as correcting the problem, it's a case of improving the collecting system, which really isn't possible," Patterson said. "We're talking about tearing up all the pipes."

Instead, the city has worked on treating the symptoms of the problem, with limited success. Chemicals have been used in the treatment process, and the city has even tried using a deodorant to mask the smell. Nothing has worked with any regularity.

For now, the city is putting its hopes in the valleywide sewerage system, a new treatment system that will be completed, officials believe, by 1984.

The city plans to include \$1 million worth of equipment to handle odor problems at the new plant.