

In Our View: Joining Forces

Local wastewater treatment districts understand that teamwork increases clout

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The economies-of-scale principle (lowering per-unit costs by expanding operations or merging) is seeping into the treatment of wastewater in north Clark County, and that bodes well for residents, especially ratepayers.

Last year the Clark Regional Wastewater District — which includes most of Salmon Creek and Hazel Dell — and the City of Vancouver became wastewater treatment partners. The agreement that was reached after three years of discussion allows sewer rates to stabilize for the long term. The merger clearly demonstrates that clout matters when it comes to project costs and service.

That's just the start of what could become a large alliance, with Ridgefield and Battle Ground also getting in on the action. A Regional Sewer Coalition Planning Study, funded by the state Department of Ecology, is under way with hopes of minimizing infrastructure costs and creating seamless operations among cities and the county.

The most recent step in this coalescing of forces was a \$10 million state loan provided to Ridgefield for a major sewer project. As Ray Legendre reported in a Columbian story, the regional sewage trunk line and pump station will connect the city to the Salmon Creek Wastewater Treatment plant. And then, businesses could more easily develop the Discovery Corridor along Interstate 5.

On a broader scale, though, the project will make Ridgefield a stronger candidate to join the north county coalition. Legendre's story included this quote from John Peterson, general manager of Clark Regional Wastewater District: "These types of regional sewer partnerships exist all around the Northwest. What usually drives them is the economies of scale being able to share in the same infrastructure."

This willingness to abandon parochial mind-sets and work together is one good example of how growth should be managed. Other government agencies would be wise to follow the lead.

The regional district intends to help Ridgefield pay for the sewer project for a very clear reason, described by Pete Capell, director of Clark County Public Works: "The benefits are less expensive if we pool our resources together than if we go it alone." How much help would come from the regional district? "Part of it has to do with the facility proposed and how it could serve other areas besides Ridgefield," he said. "How that's paid for is part of the business issues we have to address and resolve."

Obviously, they're all headed in the right direction ... together.

Wastewater treatment is a complicated topic that occupies the greater energies of expert engineers and advanced planners. But for the casual observer, it's important to understand that this is only part of the much larger subject of growth management. As we've pointed out in earlier editorials, sewer districts are not responsible for managing growth. Their job is to treat sewage and dispense clean effluent in scientifically precise ways. Managing growth is the work of county and city governments.

Although countywide growth has been stemmed by the Great Recession, rest assured, the rate of growth will increase as the recovery accelerates. Sewer districts must make sure wastewater treatment service is provided to businesses and subdivisions that need it. Just as we need the best possible schools, we need the best possible sewer districts.

Ratepayers and taxpayers should hope that the powerful partnering of wastewater treatment districts continues.

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