

Westport County Water District

The Westport County Water District (District) supplies water, sewage, and fire protection services to the Westport Village area. The District renders service but is hampered by lack of funds, staffing, and citizen participation.

Method of Investigation

The Grand Jury interviewed members of the Board of Directors of the District, residents and ratepayers, the operator/maintenance person of the water treatment and wastewater treatment facilities, the County Auditor-Controller, an assistant County Administrator, and the director of the Office of Emergency Services under the Emergency Services Authority. The Grand Jury toured the water treatment facilities and wastewater treatment facilities. The Grand Jury reviewed current books and the most recent external audit of the District.

Background Information

The District is governed by an elected board of directors and derives its operating revenue from monthly billings for water and sewer services. The District encompasses the immediate village of Westport, located 20 miles north of Fort Bragg. The District was organized in the early 1970's to provide water, sewer, and fire protection services for the village of Westport proper. The system was initiated to serve 100 water and sewer connections. At present there are 68 connections in use. Water is also supplied by contract to Wages Creek Campground and by request and fee to contractors with tank trucks. District water comes from Wages Creek through a filtration and chlorination system.

Findings

1. The District is current on all annual audits and bond payments.
2. Board meetings are in compliance with the Brown Act.
3. The present basic rate for water and sewer service is \$83.01 per month, which provides up to 12,000 gallons of water for each residential and commercial user. Water use in excess of basic service is charged according to amount of usage. Commercial hookups are charged at a higher rate than residential.
4. The District has an ongoing problem of obtaining enough citizen participation to fill the Board of Directors positions.
5. The District has experienced a chronic shortage of revenue from lack of economy of scale. The District has aggressively pursued external grant funding.
6. An outside contractor operating on behalf of the District has obtained a \$264,000 grant to do a study of the watershed and existing system.

7. The State recently awarded a grant to construct an additional water storage tank.
8. The District drilled a deep well, which has a high flow rate, but is unusable because of high manganese and iron content. Use of the well water requires a filtration system costing more than \$100,000.
9. The sewage settlement ponds suffer from sediment accumulation and sewage seepage. They require dredging, draining, and lining. The District reports no funds are available for this work.
10. Because of a shortage of personnel, the District does not mail bills in a timely manner. The 1999-2000 Grand Jury found similar problems. The District Board responded that their policy requires bills be out by the 15th of the month and that they have developed a form with a year of payment coupons to remind customers when a payment is due.
11. The District is authorized to charge \$30 per month to owners of undeveloped and unoccupied real estate parcels. The District has not implemented billing or collection of these fees, stating they would be difficult to collect because of absentee ownership and the lack of funds to legally pursue collection.
12. The 1999-2000 Grand Jury found that “one large lot, which is divided into several parcels has five RV’s hooked up to one water and sewer line and paying a single rate” and recommended that “a complete review of all properties within the district, both occupied and vacant be made to determine if the district is receiving all revenues due.” The District responded that the recommendation was “in progress and of the highest priority.” The present Grand Jury finds that the single hookup for several residences still exists and the Chair of the Board of Directors reiterated this two-year old response.
13. The 1999-2000 Grand Jury found that the Waste Water Capital Reserve Fund as mandated by the California State Water Resources Control Board was in arrears and recommended that “delinquent payments be brought up to date.” The District Board responded that capital funds should come from hook up fees, but that the shortage of new hookups caused the lack of funds. The Capital Fund now shows a zero balance.

Recommendations

- A. The District continue its pursuit of funding and grants for improvements to the water and wastewater systems. (Findings 5, 6, 7)
- B. The District consider a loan or a bond initiative to finance the needed filtration system for the drilled well and deferred maintenance on sewage settlement ponds. (Findings 8, 9)

- C. To address problems of economy of scale, the District contract water service to new development adjacent to the District. (Finding 5)
- D. The District ensure it bills and collects fees in a timely manner. (Finding 10)
- E. The District pursue billing and collection of fees for undeveloped and unoccupied parcels and pass an ordinance to include unpaid fees in the cost of initial hookup. (Finding 11)
- F. The District review the matter of the recreational vehicles on a single service and determine if additional fees are warranted. (Finding 12)

Comment

It is not within the purview of the Grand Jury to make recommendations to citizens concerning political issues. However, in regard to the lack of citizen participation in the Water District, the Grand Jury would remind the citizenry of the District: “one gets the government one deserves.”

Response required

Westport County Water District Board of Directors