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## Adelanto flushing wastewater woes

### Private company to take over city's plant

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Natasha Lindstrom, Staff Writer

ADELANTO • It's been five years since Adelanto embarked on a much-needed \$14 million expansion of its wastewater plant that has yet to come to fruition.

After a series of technical and communication issues, plans for an innovative new system ultimately flopped, and last year city officials found themselves scrambling to block a ban on new sewer connections threatened by the regional water board.

By partnering with a new company to build and run its plant, the city finally seems to be on track toward flushing its wastewater woes.

But all the delays have come with a price tag: The final project and its related costs look to be about \$6.5 million more than originally planned.

Wednesday night the City Council is set to finalize a \$7 million contract for Costa Mesa-based PERC Water to complete the wastewater plant's expansion, plus another \$500,000 annually to operate the plant. PERC has already begun design work and plans to finish the project within 18 months, for a completion date in fall 2013.

"Our business model is really providing solutions to cities for water and wastewater," said Bob Nespeca, vice president of asset management for PERC. He added, "We use a very tried and true process."

PERC will build off the work of MicroMedia Filtration, which was first hired in 2007 to do the plant expansion. MMF planned to double the capacity to treat sewage at half the cost of more traditional methods by using less energy.

But the effort ran into several obstacles, with the city "separating amicably" from MMF a few months ago after paying only \$2.6 million of its \$7 million contract, according to City Manager Jim Hart.

Meanwhile, the city continues to struggle with insufficient sewage capacity. Adelanto has had to divert up to 800,000 gallons of raw sewage into Victor Valley Wastewater Reclamation Authority's facility since May 2010.

With VVWRA charging about \$65,000 per month, the city will have spent about \$2.5 million in diversion fees by the time the plant expansion is complete. Connection fees from The Geo Group's new detention center and the new Adelanto High School have helped offset the cost, but the city is running out of sources to pay for it.

"It's so critical that we get this done because there is no stream of revenue to cover this diversion," Hart said.



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Aside from \$2.5 million in diversion fees, the final expansion process looks to cost about \$4 million more than initially estimated due to the delays and various necessary steps, such as building more percolation ponds at about \$500,000 each.

Paying for the wastewater infrastructure is part of the reason residents faced water rate hikes in 2010 that doubled and tripled some bills.

The plant project is being financed through Adelanto Public Utility Authority bond funds. The city was required to raise water rates for the first time since 2001 when the APUA refinanced bonds to cut their interest rate in half.

With help from that refinancing, the city should have sufficient funds to see the plant expansion through, Hart said. He noted the total project should still fall well below a proposed \$28 million traditional project pitched to the city before hiring MMF.

PERC will be able to use about 80 percent of the equipment installed by MMF, Nespeca said. The city will try to sell off three screens from MMF worth about \$500,000 each that PERC won't be using, Hart said.

Hiring PERC means canceling the contract with operator United Water, but Nespeca said PERC will "seriously consider" hiring the three to four employees who have been working at the plant.

The city has pledged to finish the expansion no later than 2014 to avoid another threat of a sewer connection ban by the Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board. Chuck Curtis, supervising engineer with Lahontan, said he sees the move to hire PERC as a "positive development in them taking action to come into compliance."

The city also hired Harvey Gobas of the Psomas consulting firm to oversee the project with PERC.

"I'm eager that we've got somebody on board who seems to be as eager as we are to get this project to be in compliance with Lahontan and just get finished," Mayor Cari Thomas said.

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