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GOVERNMENT

Cayuga County Water and Sewer Authority hears from experts on regionalization

Ryan Franklin ryan.franklin@lee.net Aug 29, 2018 Updated Sep 1, 2018

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Engineer Greg Mosure, left, presented Wednesday at Auburn City Hall an update on the regional master plan being developed by the Cayuga County Water and Sewer Authority to explore the water and sewer needs throughout the area. Jeff Smith and Tim Hens, second and third from left, explained how Chautauqua County and Genesee

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County approached similar plans.

Ryan Franklin, The Citizen

AUBURN — If all the municipalities of Cayuga County one day decide to pursue an expanded, possibly countywide water and sewer system, the best thing they can do is cooperate.

That was one of the central messages at a panel discussion at Auburn City Hall Wednesday, where the Cayuga County Water and Sewer Authority provided an update on the development of a regional water and sewer master plan and hosted experts from other counties that had already developed similar projects.

The CCWSA last year started the development of a regional master plan with the goal of identifying the most cost-effective approach to serving the current and future water and wastewater needs for all of the county.

To do that, the study, the first of its kind in the county since 1970, is assessing the condition of existing water and sewer infrastructure, the feasibility of expanding infrastructure to un- or underserved municipalities and the possibility of alternate sources of water to increase resiliency in light of harmful algal booms on the Finger Lakes.

Greg Mosure, senior managing engineer with Barton and Loguidice, the firm hired by CCWSA to develop the plan through a combination of a state grant and matching funds from Cayuga County, said the region continues to change and infrastructure must change with it.

"A lot has changed in the last 50 years within Cayuga County," Mosure said. "Does business as usual still make sense?"

As part of the study, which includes a citizen advisory committee to ensure the variety of voices in the county are heard, has assessed 10 municipalities and their water and sewer infrastructure throughout the county.

One of the preliminary findings of that assessment, Mosure said, is that the cost to replace equipment that has outlived its service life in those municipalities could range from \$31 to \$40 million.

Meanwhile, tapping into an alternative source other than Owasco Lake, which provides water through Auburn and the town of Owasco to 75 percent of the population, could be another \$21 to \$40 million.

Doug Selby, the former director of CCWSA and a current consultant, said "the money is what makes projects happen," noting that many items from the 1970 assessment were never completed thanks to a lack of funding.

That prompted the current study, Selby said, with hopes to actually bring the recommendations to fruition.

"What we wanted to get out of this is how to make the plan a reality, not just a document that sits on a shelf," Selby said.

To better understand that, CCWSA hosted Genesee County's Tim Hens and Chautauqua County's Jeff Smith, both of whom were deeply involved with their respective county's water and sewer regionalization projects, explained their approaches.

Hens said Genesee County ultimately decided to both expand its two main purveyors, Batavia and LeRoy, and also connect to the Monroe and Erie County Water Authorities, with the long-term goal of complete regionalization.

One of the most significant hurdles to overcome, Hens said, was the often political nature of such projects, noting that some towns and villages were initially very resistant until deciding it made the most sense to tackle the high costs of asset replacement or upgrades as a group.

"Everybody in the community realized nobody could do it on their own," Hens said.

The first phase of Genesee County's project, which came in at \$30.3 million, was funded through a combination of revenue, grants, bonding, and a surcharge of \$0.60 per 1,000 gallons used that applied only to water users in a "water pays for water" strategy.

Hens warned that if Cayuga County's municipalities were considering any projects, it would be best to act quickly, noting how the second phase, long put on hold by 9/11 and the Great Recession, had nearly tripled in cost from 1998 to now.

Smith echoed Hens' comments on the political nature of the project and said how crucial it had been for northern Chautauqua County to connect all its mayors, supervisors and more through a local development corporation.

"That dialogue was crucial in coming over a lot of the projects," Smith said, adding that another important factor was bringing in a neutral third party to develop rate pricing to avoid the perception of some municipalities "bailing out" others.

By working together, the different municipalities were able to reduce the combined costs for their projects from \$70 million to approximately \$35 million.

Both Hens and Smith also cited unexpected benefits of the projects, like a \$1.6 billion investment from a new business planning to bring 900 jobs to Chautauqua County thanks to the newly expanded access to water.

CCWSA Director of Operations Jeanine Wilson said after the presentation the authority had not decided on any approach yet, and the study was focused primarily on assessing the needs in the county and how to address them.

Mosure added that a draft of the plan is currently underway, with hopes to issue the final regional master plan before the end of the year.

Staff writer Ryan Franklin can be reached at (315) 282-2252 or ryan.franklin@lee.net. Follow him on Twitter @RyanNYFranklin



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Ryan Franklin

County government reporter