

Water and sewer battles waged for decades

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City sewer + water = development. That seems to be the formula for economic growth in most of McHenry County, but putting in place those public utilities usually isn't that easy.

Richmond is suing a developer for sewer connection fees for a subdivision that never was built. As of last week, residents will pay more on their water bills to cover the cost of building a wastewater treatment plant that would have served that neighborhood. Meanwhile, Johnsburg residents and officials have spent years fighting in court over a \$10 million sewer project.

But decades before these disputes, Crystal Lake also faced resistance when the city sought to expand public water and sewer to the Crystal Vista and Crystal Garden subdivisions, west of the lake.

"It was a very challenging process that took a number of years," said Joe Misurelli, Crystal Lake city manager from 1976 to 2002.

In the 1960s, the city explored adding those two subdivisions and some properties on the north side of the lake – about 1,200 lots total – to the public water and sewer lines. A number of residents rallied behind the project, Misurelli said, but there was a strong contingent of homeowners who thought it was too expensive.

"The biggest factor would typically be cost, because it would be the upfront cost to construct water and sewer mains, the contractor, the excavation, all the things involved that can be rather expensive," he said.

It wasn't always about money, though.

"Once in a while, you ran into somebody who just philosophically didn't want water or sewer because that would be like they weren't in a rural area anymore," Misurelli said.

The project took about 12 years and wasn't completed until the mid 1970s.

Misurelli said one stalwart resident was so firm in his opposition to the project that he refused to hook up to the sewer until he was ordered to by the court.

Then in the early 1980s, Crystal Lake officials wanted to extend the sewer and water lines to the north shore to service about 150 homes where the lots were too small for septic, Misurelli said.

Beyond selling residents on the idea of public water and sewer, however, Crystal Lake officials had to convince homeowners they should annex into the city.

"The association owned the streets," Misurelli said. "[They] had to be deeded to the city to become public streets so they could put water and sewer lines down the street."

Again, homeowners resisted and the project stalled.

"It took some years for a majority of property owners to say 'Yes, this makes sense and is what we're willing to

do," Misurelli said.

It wasn't until the city secured state and federal grants to lower the cost that enough residents supported the project. The north shore project was completed in the late 1990s.

McHenry might face similar resistance to the cost of sewer and water hookups as the city tries to extend utilities to the Hunterville Park subdivision, along the Fox River just north of Water Tower Marina, west of Lincoln Road.

There are about 59 homes in the area, and officials estimated that adding them to the sewer and water system would cost \$800,000 to \$850,000. McHenry Deputy City Administrator Doug Martin said some residents in the neighborhood were concerned they wouldn't be able to afford the hookup costs, so officials are trying to defray the price.

"Funding is key," Martin said. "We've been consistently seeking funding at the state level, federal level. We just haven't had as much luck as we would hope."

Most residents in the city of McHenry use city water and sewer, and its availability is one of the reasons the city has been successful commercially, said Dennis Sandquist, McHenry County director of planning & development.

"It's a more dependable water source and more dependable method of ... making sure waste is adequately treated," Sandquist said.

The McHenry County Regional Planning Commission's 2030 plan predicts that towns with large sewer and water systems, such as Crystal Lake, McHenry, Woodstock, Huntley and Lake in the Hills, will flourish the most in the coming decades, he said.

"The majority of development will happen in communities which do have sewer and water," Sandquist said.

Making sure sewer and water systems are available to businesses is a formula that's worked well for Spring Grove so far.

Almost all residents use wells and septic, but 95 businesses in town use the public sewer and water supply, including Jewel and Walgreens.

"If you have to have a septic on your property, that takes up a lot of your property," said Spring Grove Trustee Ron Kopke. "If businesses realize if they can go on the sewer, they can expand the size of their businesses over where the septic used to be. It [makes] their property more valuable."

An added benefit of Spring Grove's system is that only businesses that hook up to the system pay connection fees, so residents haven't been asked to foot the bill.

It's helped in keeping residents happy and still accommodating business development – something Crystal Lake found to be the key to economic growth along Routes 14 and 31, Misurelli said.

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