



Print Page

City council to eye update to water plan Manager's contract also on agenda for Tuesday

By John Brennan
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A public hearing on an updated water conservation plan for the city will highlight Tuesday's special meeting of the Fort Morgan City Council.

The 7 p.m. meeting will be preceded by an executive session at 5:30 p.m. for a conference with the city attorney. The purpose of the closed session is to receive legal advice on specific legal questions related to "litigation settlement parameters proposed by The Fort Morgan Times," according to the council meeting agenda.

The city filed a declaratory judgment action against The Times in Morgan County District Court last month after the newspaper requested copies of evaluation forms filled out by each council member for the evaluation of City Manager Michael Nagy.

Tuesday's special council meeting agenda also includes an item titled "Discussion and/or action of employment/contract for City Manager Nagy." The meeting packet provided to The Times, however, contained no documents or background information on that agenda item.

The proposed water conservation plan is an update of the plan first adopted by the city in 1996. The revision, required every seven years under Colorado law, reflects the change from well water to surface water from the Colorado-Big Thompson project as the city's primary potable water source.

It also takes into account that all city water system connections are now metered, which was the main conservation goal of the original 1996 water conservation plan. That goal was accomplished over five years and completed in 2000, according to the new plan.

The goal of the updated plan is "to prevent and minimize water waste and to promote wise water use" within the city.

The city has "no imminent or pressing water supply or delivery issues," according to the proposed plan update.

The city's current water demand is approximately 4,000 acre-feet per year, and it operates about 50 miles of water mains serving more than 3,300 homes as well as commercial, industrial and government users.

The city's largest consumer of water is Cargill Meat Solutions, which represented about 43 percent of the city's total water use in 2006 — roughly equal to the amount of water used by all residential, commercial, light industrial and government customers combined.

The city's 2003 Comprehensive Plan predicts significant growth in the city over the next 20 years, with a projected population of 16,817 in 2025. Water requirements are also expected to rise dramatically, with an estimated increase of 78 percent, or about 4,200 acre-feet, between 2005 and 2025, the plan says.

Ironically, a decrease in water usage in the city, spurred by watering restrictions imposed during the 2003 drought, has left the city's water fund in something of a financial bind, the plan says.

When water consumption dropped in response to the restrictions, so did the revenues of the city water system.

“Residential water use per capita has been reduced by 31 percent since the 2003 drought due to lingering effects of the water restrictions and tiered rates that were in effect during that time,” the plan states. “Since 2003, residents have continued to practice water conservation measures in their homes.

“The challenge to the City of Fort Morgan is to balance water conservation with the need to keep revenue at a point to pay bond debt, pay for capital improvements and to pay for operating and maintenance expenditures,” the plan states.

The updated conservation plan essentially keeps the city's current conservation programs and practices in place, and focuses primarily on residential users.

“Since the industrial users already utilize best management practices of water consumption and recycling, this remaining group of users (commercial, residential, public or governmental) provides the greatest potential for long-term water savings achieved through conservation measures and efforts,” the plan says.

In addition to its existing conservation programs, the city will begin water audits for residential, commercial and industrial customers in 2008, with a goal of auditing one-third of water users each year. The audits will help customers monitor their water use and look for ways to save water.

Among the current conservation programs that will be continued are promoting landscape and irrigation efficiency for parks; monitoring the water distribution and treatment system for leaks and making repairs; metering of water use and billing according to usage; public education about water conservation, including distribution of water conservation kits and rebates for installing efficient fixtures; and the use of ordinances and regulations to prevent water waste and restrict use in the event of shortages.

Higher water rates and permanent watering restrictions are also measures the city may explore, according to the plan.

“The daily average water usage was seen to drop approximately 10 percent when outdoor watering restrictions were placed. Having watering restrictions and water use surcharges permanently in place is being considered by the city,” the plan says.

And with Fort Morgan committed to participating in another surface water supply project — the

Northern Integrated Supply Project (NISP), an 11-year project that began in 2007 and will ultimately cost the city more than \$36 million — water rates may have to be raised.

“With the impending participation in the NISP project, the City of Fort Morgan can not afford a reduction in water sale revenue,” the plan states. “A rate study was completed (last) year to address the need to increase water rates and impose surcharges...”

Also on Tuesday’s council agenda are:

- Presentation of a sewer backup policy, which would provide guidelines for the review of claims related to sanitary sewer backup damage to private property.
- Discussion and possible action on bids for a sanitation refuse truck and compactor, industrial park land parcels and a portable air compressor.

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