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Grand jury foreman stands by withdrawn Chualar sewer system report's recommendations

Foreman stands by panel's recommendations in report

By Jim Johnson

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Salinas >> A civil grand jury report released last month on the outdated Chualar sewer system may have gotten a few of the facts wrong but its recommendations are still valid, according to the jury foreman.

The interim report, mistakenly released April 18 by the 2013-14 Monterey County Civil Grand Jury, found that the Chualar community's relatively rudimentary, 50-year-old sewer system relying on pumps, pipes and holding ponds near the banks of the Salinas River should be replaced as soon as possible before its deterioration causes "major problems including possible health issues."



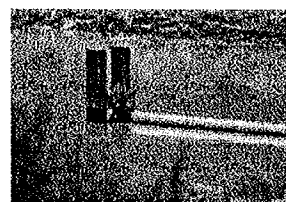
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An aerator works in a holding pond near the Salinas River and Chualar River Road on Friday. A civil grand jury recommends replacement of Chualar's 50-year-old sewer system. (David Royal - Monterey Herald)

According to the report, all Chualar wastewater from toilets, sinks and showers flows through pipes to a central pumping station that relies on two pumps to send the raw sewage through a pipeline under Highway 101 to the holding ponds, which function as a kind of septic tank.

Among the problems with the current system, the report found, is the risk the raw sewage will leak into the river from the holding ponds, which are in the 100-year floodplain.

The report recommended a \$4 million sewage treatment plant be built on the east side of Chualar, which could also supply recycled water for farm field irrigation, and that the county Board of



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Grass grows on the end of a pipe feeding into a holding pond near the Salinas River and Chualar River Road on Friday. (David Royal - Monterey Herald)

Supervisors take the lead on allocating or finding funding to pay project costs for the largely poor, Latino community. The treatment plant would make it unnecessary to pump sewage to the holding ponds near the river, according to the report.

Less than a week after its release, the grand jury withdrew the report because county officials discovered an unedited version of the document had been released by jury foreman Francis Small, who acknowledged the error and said he was "extraordinarily embarrassed" by the mistake.

It turns out, Small said, that he hit the wrong button on his computer and issued an early version

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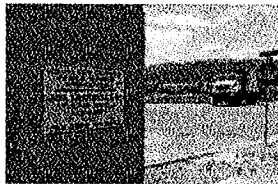
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of the report that had not been fact-checked by county officials, and the withdrawal spurred a new round of review that has further delayed the report's release. Small said he expects the report to be reissued by next week.

According to county public works director Bob Murdoch, the report inaccurately characterized the risks associated with the system, misidentifying the type of pipelines the system employs and suggesting the pipes carrying raw sewage to the holding ponds rupture regularly, as well as the chances of the holding ponds overflowing into the river.

Murdoch said the report also found Chualar lacks any type of sewage treatment, which he said is inaccurate because the holding ponds where the raw sewage ends up are technically a treatment system.

Despite the errors, Small and Murdoch agreed it is clear Chualar needs a new sewer system, and Murdoch said his department has been working on the issue for some time.



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A sewer pump at Grant and Main streets in Chualar. (David Royal - Monterey Herald)



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Fences surround holding ponds near the Salinas River and Chualar River Road. (David Royal - Monterey Herald)

Murdoch said the county is already actively seeking grant funding to upgrade the system's technology and infrastructure. He said the county has already secured a \$200,000 federal grant for an upgrade project that is under way. It's important for the county to find funding sources for capital improvements because the Chualar community is not able to afford the millions a treatment plant and other upgrades would cost.

County officials have already taken a lead role on capital upgrades for water systems in the San Jerardo and San Lucas communities, both also largely poor and Latino.

Jim Johnson can be reached at 753-6753.

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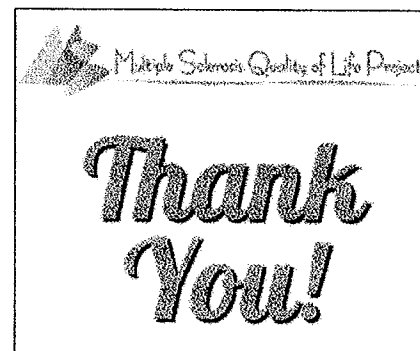
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Aged Chualar sewer system could be for sale soon

51-year-old system costs more than community pays

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SALINAS >> An aging, deteriorating and expensive Chualar sewer system appears headed for the auction block.

On Wednesday, a Monterey County budget committee agreed to recommend the small Salinas Valley farming town's 51-year-old sewer system be put up for sale after years of failing to meet its operating and repair expenses, and with an expensive upgrade in the near future. The committee, which includes Supervisors Lou Calcagno and Fernando Armenta, will ask the full board to allow Public Works director Bob Murdoch to seek potential public or private buyers for the system by issuing a request for expressions of interest.

Murdoch said the sewer system is "not very well-maintained" and noted that it needed about \$300,000 in county loan funding, which the committee also recommended on Wednesday, just to meet its operating expenses for the current fiscal year and pay for emergency repairs to the system's pump station when it overflowed in January. He said the county could be on the hook for millions of dollars more over the next several years for the system, which he said needs a new rate study, after years without a rate increase, and a master plan.

"Unfortunately, I believe this is going to be an ongoing problem," Murdoch said.

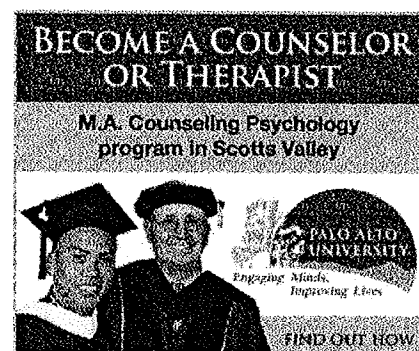
According to a county staff report, grant funding has helped pay for some of the system's needed upgrades but a more comprehensive solution is required, and the community's \$14 per month sewer charge and other revenue hasn't even been enough to pay annual operating expenses, let alone repairs, for years. The system's annual expenses run about \$150,000, while revenue is about \$70,000.

That has led to years of deferred maintenance, and escalating emergency repair costs that have hit particularly hard over the past few years as the crumbling system has undergone major fixes. The county has provided the Chualar system about \$1 million in funding over the years, according to public works official Dirk Medema.

The sewer rates are so low, the report found, that it leaves the community unable to qualify for grant funding from the state water board, which requires rates be equal to at least 1.5 percent of the community's \$43,125 median household income (about \$54 per month).

The report said the Rural Community Assistance Corporation is working on securing grants and conducting public outreach in the community, which is 97 percent Latino, as part of an effort to raise sewer rates.

Calcagno said the best solution would be to ask Salinas city officials to extend a sewer line to the old Firestone plant south of the city and allow Chualar to hook up to that line.



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In the past decade, the county has sold off utility systems, including the Las Palmas sewer system and the Chualar and Ralph Lane water systems, to California American Water.

The budget committee's decision came on the heels of last week's re-release of an interim report from the 2013-14 civil grand jury on the Chualar sewer system. The report pointed out the system's poor condition and recommended the county back funding for a new \$4 million sewage treatment plant.

The report, which was mistakenly released in April before being withdrawn and edited, pointed out the system pumps raw sewage from the community to retention ponds located near the Salinas River two miles away where it is processed. It argued the aged system's deteriorating nature and risk of the ponds being flooded by the river created a "high potential to cause major problems," including possible health issues.

Also Wednesday, the committee heard a report on the county's recommended 2014-15 budget, which includes a \$543.1 million general fund — about \$19 million more than last year's adopted budget but about \$23 million less than requested by county department heads.

While the recommended budget includes funding for 27 filled positions slated for elimination under the baseline budget, it does not preserve 15 filled parks positions — all but one from the south county lake resorts that have been hit hard by low water levels and declining visitor numbers. However, county officials have indicated they are looking for ways to shift those employees to other county vacancies in an effort to avoid most or all layoffs.

Budget hearings are set to begin June 10.

Jim Johnson can be reached at 753-6753.

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