

THE SUN-GAZETTE

Tooleville, Exeter connection talks start in earnest

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By: Ben Irwin

Consolidation talks begin among Exeter, Tooleville, Self-Help Enterprises and Leadership Counsel; Tooleville well rehab project moves forward in the wake of August emergency

EXETER – Tooleville residents' hard-fought campaign for consolidation fell short in September 2019 when Exeter City Council turned down the community's request to connect. Now the two parties have another shot at helping Tooleville residents attain their right to water after over 20 years of struggle.

This time around, Blanca Escobedo, Tulare County regional policy manager with Leadership Counsel said Leadership Counsel, Self-Help Enterprises and Maria Olivera, a board member of the Tooleville Mutual Nonprofit Water Association and representatives from the city of Exeter met on a conference call last week to discuss the background of the project, what the consolidation process is and what the next steps are.

"I think what's different from last time, there were no discussions really beforehand," Escobedo said. "Everyone had three minutes to speak, but couldn't really address all the concerns and it got pretty heated."

Exeter city manager Adam Ennis said the initial talks from last week were productive.

"From the city side, it's important for us to get a good clear picture painted of what a consolidation would look like when it's done, what the ongoing would look like," Ennis said. "There hasn't been a good feasibility study done from what I can tell. There was one done early on, but there were a lot of assumptions made that really just turned out to be incorrect."

Ennis said Self-Help Enterprises appears to have secured funding to do a feasibility study, and the city plans to share information and be a part of the process, which was not the case in the 2019 consolidation attempt. Ennis' concerns revolve around long-term costs and feasibility of a consolidation project.

Escobedo said despite the city's similar concerns that snuffed out consolidation efforts in 2019, the engineering and fiscal concerns are all within the realm of possibility and an updated feasibility study will go a long way in addressing the city's concerns. Ennis said the city plans to continue to meet with the group regularly, and has a subcommittee with two council members to guide staff in the process.

Should negotiations fall through, SB 403, signed into law by Gov. Gavin Newsom, could be another way to force consolidation. Penned by Senate Majority Whip Lena Gonzales and championed by Leadership Counsel, SB 403 allows residents living in places like Tooleville to submit a petition that would trigger a public hearing with the State Water Board to begin the consolidation process.

Directing Attorney for Leadership Counsel Michael Claiborne said SB 403 puts Tooleville on very good footing with the state should negotiations with Exeter not work out.

“I also think it’s really cool that Tooleville residents testified in support of a bill and helped inspire a bill that changed state law and should help other communities outside of Tooleville as well,” Claiborne said.

At a sparsely attended Tooleville community meeting last Wednesday at the Exeter Veterans Memorial Building, Tooleville resident Maria Garcia illustrated what residents have been subject to during the decades-long wait for access to a clean, reliable source of water.

“We would have to take a bucket and fill up the swamp cooler, we’d have to climb up to the roof with the water. Toward the end of the day we would just have to turn it off because there wasn’t enough water,” Garcia said, translated by Eva Dominguez of Self-Help Enterprises. “Hopefully we can get these repairs done, it looks like it’s going to cool down finally...having to wake up early to do the dishes because there wasn’t water—we take for granted that we can flush the toilet or wash our hands.”

Garcia’s toils have been especially hard after an August emergency, when one of Tooleville’s two active wells stopped producing water and threw the town into immediate crisis. Progress with Self-Help Enterprises in mending Tooleville’s 77 connection water system is coming along.

Well rehabs for the Alfred Street and Morgan Street wells—acid wash cleaning if the well is stable enough to handle it and new 20-horsepower pumps lowered as far as possible—two 10,000-gallon storage tanks and a new electrical panel and pole to support the new infrastructure for roughly \$120,000. The funds are being requested through Self-Help Enterprise’s contract with the state for technical assistance on water infrastructure projects for disadvantaged communities, a cost the less than 200 residents would not be able to incur as ratepayers.

Most of the project is still waiting for state approval, but the storage tanks have already been connected to the Alfred Street well to help with the low water pressure residents have been experiencing most of the summer and into the fall.