

THE SUN-GAZETTE

East Orosi remains clogged in wastewater woes

April 25, 2024

By: Darren Fraser



(Kenny Goodman)

REEDLEY – Over the weekend of April 5, raw sewage backed up into the yards and homes of two or three East Orosi residents, which was another incident in the community’s 20-year-long fight to obtain what a lawyer – who represents some residents – described as a struggle to obtain “a safe and healthy life.”

Kelsey Hinton of the Community Water Center (CWC), an organization that has been working with East Orosi residents to secure safe and reliable water systems for over 17 years, said after the backup, several residents were told not to shower or use their toilets. The situation was ultimately resolved, but Hinton described it as “a grave injustice where residents are paying for a service that is ultimately failing them.”

Eva Dominguez, a manager for Self-Help Enterprises, said the latest problem – one of three recent incidents – has to do with the city’s antiquated septic system and foreign objects being introduced to it.

“There have been instances where metal things, a screw, made it into the pumps for the lift station that push the waste out towards Orosi,” she said. The objects foul the pumps, resulting in solid waste entering a pipeline that is wholly inadequate to handle the volume.

Self-Help Enterprises is a private organization that is spearheading efforts to help East Oroshi correct its recurring wastewater system problems. Residents pay for their wastewater services through the East Oroshi Community Services District (EOCSD). EOCSD has been entangled in controversy for years regarding suspect billing practices and nearly nonexistent customer service.

INNOVATIVE FOR ITS TIME

Dominguez said East Oroshi homes are on a septic system, as opposed to a gravity sewer system that most urban communities utilize. Homes either have their own septic tank or two or three homes share a larger septic tank. She said the system dates back to the late 1970s or early 1980s.

“It was an innovative design for the 70s or 80s,” Dominguez said. But the problem – and the problem that is plaguing East Oroshi – is the septic tanks must be well maintained and emptied or else problems arise.

“The issue is the septic tanks are not well maintained. Some need pumping,” she said. “We don’t know if any have failed because we don’t have records of that.” She described the situation as a domino effect. When the septic tanks – which handle solid waste – fail, the waste enters a small pipe that ultimately feeds into the Cutler-Oroshi treatment facility.

“It (the pipe) cannot sustain the amount of solids that go through there on a daily basis,” she said.

East Oroshi’s wastewater system is similar to an onion – removing one layer reveals another, more troubling layer. For example, Dominguez said maintaining the septic system is the responsibility of the EOCSD. But the five-member EOCSD Board has not held a meeting since August 2023. Dominguez said the Board has not been able to establish a quorum to conduct a meeting.

One reason for lack of a quorum is the Board is two members short and it can only establish a quorum if the three remaining members meet, which has not been the case. But Janaki Anagha, CWC Director of Community Advocacy, said the district simply lacks the capabilities to be effective.

“EOCSD is propped up almost entirely by state funding at this time,” Anagha said. “It’s a bankrupt district.”

Despite the district’s myriad problems, Dominguez said she is optimistic changes can be made. And despite the state’s looming \$60 billion deficit, state funding is available to help East Oroshi and other disadvantaged communities with their decrepit infrastructure. Dominguez acknowledged the best solution for East Oroshi is to install a gravity-type sewer system. She said the estimated cost for the project is about \$6 million.

“Our hope is that in the next six months, we will be able to apply for funding through the state water board to start construction of a new pipeline,” she said. “It’s about a nine-month process. We can also look for matching USDA funds. The ideal (situation) would be if all the funding comes at one time.”

CONSOLIDATION IS THE KEY

Like Dominguez, Janaki Anagha from the CWC is cautiously optimistic regarding the availability of state funding.

“(This is) because of the Safe and Affordable Funding for Equity and Resilience (SAFER) program,” she said. “I forget the exact amount, but there was a lot of funding set aside by Gov. Newsom in 2021, I think. This was a large funding pool set aside to specifically address drinking water issues in disadvantaged communities across California.”

She added, “That is a static funding source we’ve been relying on to staff contractors and hydrologists and attorneys — and also, to pay for the actual infrastructure costs that are going into fixing things like East Orosi.”

But unlike Dominguez, who said funding can be applied to correct existing infrastructure problems, CWC and Anagha have long advocated for consolidation of the East Orosi and Orosi water systems.

“The only thing that is going to fix this situation is getting resources in the form of full-scale annexation (consolidation) to this community,” she said. “Our goal is to see a full-scale annexation of East Orosi, both drinking water and wastewater, by the Orosi Public Utilities District.”

It was not that long ago that the idea of consolidating with its less populated and less affluent neighbor was pure fiction for Orosi; but Anagha described this new change in thinking as a “recent pivot for Orosi.”

This pivot in Orosi’s position on consolidation comes despite a legacy of distrust regarding EOCSD’s billing practices. On Aug. 31, 2023, CWC joined East Orosi residents, members of Vecinos Unidos (Neighbors United) and members of the AGUA Coalition in a march from Templo La Paz Mennonite Brethren to the EOCSD headquarters – a trailer.

The marchers demanded that EOCSD employee Luci Rodriguez, who is in charge of billing, resign. Marchers accused Rodriguez of misbilling, double billing, harassing ratepayers and violating local and state policies.

The date of Aug. 31 marked the last time the EOCSD Board held a meeting; Rodriguez is still employed. Despite this, Anagha remains hopeful.

“There is a very deep desire to get this thing fixed,” she said. “Because, in many ways, East Orosi is just a caricature of what’s wrong with the way water and wastewater (systems) are done in California. There’s a sense that if we can fix this one, there’s hope for other communities, too.”