

New water alliance to expand sewage access in Clark County

Thursday, 24 May 2012 08:30 VBJ Staff Top Stories



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Clark County leaders have finally unclogged a sewage dilemma that's bedeviled them for close to a decade. By creating the Discovery Clean Water Alliance they hope to hold down wastewater rates while also expanding sewer access in Ridgefield, Battle Ground and Hazel Dell.



The Discovery Clean Water Alliance hopes sewer expansion along the Discovery Corridor will help spur economic development and create jobs. Photo: Buck Heidrick

Cleaning the water that's flushed or poured down the drain sounds mundane, but inadequate wastewater treatment has long held back economic growth in the north half of Clark County, as the Columbia River Economic Development Council (CREDC) affirmed in its recently released strategic plan. The plan states that sewer expansion is key to business growth along the Discovery Corridor – an area surrounding Interstate 5 that includes land owned by the Port of Ridgefield and by PeaceHealth. By some estimates, Discovery Corridor sites could host thousands of new jobs if sewer access is extended.

Meanwhile, high wastewater hookup fees have also stifled restaurant development in Hazel Dell.

In a non-binding memorandum of understanding (MOU) document, officials from Clark County, the Clark Regional Wastewater District, Ridgefield and Battle Ground have collectively agreed to pitch in together to plan and develop expanded sewage. Battle Ground and Clark Regional Waste Water District customers would still be billed as they are now, while Ridgefield has separately agreed to have Clark Regional Wastewater manage its system.



Paul Lewis, Ridgefield's interim city manager, said the Discovery Clean Water Alliance aims to provide a higher level of clean water service at a lower rate for much of north Clark County. Photo: Buck Heidrick

According to initial estimates, the Discovery Clean Water Alliance would save a typical affected household \$25 per month in rate hikes that would have resulted from developing multiple separate sewer systems, said Paul Lewis, Ridgefield's interim city manager. Clark County Public Works Director Pete Capell said he also expects the partnership's savings to result in lower hookup fees, which could spur fresh

development in Hazel Dell.

"When we combine our efforts, everybody benefits," Lewis said. "It's not just about funding new development. This will give us the opportunity to provide a higher level of service at a lower rate."

The Discovery Clean Water Alliance is the result of more than eight years of negotiations between Ridgefield, Battle Ground, Clark County and the Clark Regional Wastewater District.

"It can be challenging for four different agencies with different elected bodies to agree," Capell said. "Each agency has a different agenda. We were finally able to work through that, building trust and making sure that the final package is something that supports everyone's long-term vision and is mutually beneficial."

The \$40 million sewer agreement, detailed online at www.discoverycwa.org, will go through a process of public review, and could change in small details depending on citizen input. But its proponents have set an aggressive timetable for moving forward. Lewis said the alliance hopes to cement more formal agreements by the end of August, if not sooner. Capell estimates that the construction of a pump system and gravity-fed force main sewage pipe could be under way by early 2014, or even next year. For at least the next five years, treatment plants in Salmon Creek and Ridgefield would continue to operate as they do now.