

Plans proceed for Colona-area water plant

By Lia Salvatierra
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Plans for a 6 million gallon-per-day water treatment facility off of U.S Highway 550 near Colona now await final approval from the Ouray County Board of County Commissioners, after a special use permit was OK'd by the county's Planning Commission on Tuesday.

Project 7 Water Authority serves nearly 60,000 water users through one treatment plant in Montrose fed with water from the Gunnison River. The organization has been working on this new facility plan to increase resiliency since 2019, said Miles Graham, deputy project manager with the Project 7 Regional Water Supply Program.

Graham said it is very unusual for Project 7's large service area to rely on a single water source and system, especially with rising risks such as wildfire.

Project 7's service area includes Tri-County Water Conservancy District, which feeds more than 900 taps in Ouray County including northern Log Hill Mesa, Pleasant Valley, Idlewild and Eagle Hill, Graham said. The town of Ridgway and Dallas Creek Water Company also rely on Project 7 through Tri-County as an emergency water source, he said. Menoken and Chipeta water districts and the municipalities of Montrose,

Delta and Olathe are also served by the water authority.

The special use permit allows for the construction of two 5.5-mile, 24-inch pipelines and a treatment facility on a nearly 46-acre parcel south of Colona just north of Billy Creek State Wildlife Area. One would transmit raw water to the treatment facility from Ridgway Reservoir — where the authority has sufficient, existing water rights — and another would distribute the potable water to users.

The special use permit will allow the district to treat 6 million gallons, enough to meet the indoor water demands of Project 7 users, Graham said. But Project 7 chose a pipeline large enough to handle a future capacity up to 12 million gallons per day. This would allow Project 7 to shift up to 33% of its current 30 million gallons of raw water from the Gunnison River to Ridgway Reservoir.

"Right now this is a resiliency program, not a growth program," Graham said.

The Ouray County Land Use Department recommended the special use permit be approved for an indefinite term until the facility becomes obsolete or inoperable.

Planning commission debate

During Tuesday's hearing, planning commissioners unanimously approved the special use

permit after debating impact on wildlife during and after facility and pipeline construction, the pertinence of a pending environmental assessment, and ultimately adding a few conditions pertaining to both.

An environmental assessment, which is a byproduct of a National Environmental Policy Act study and not required by the county's special use permit process, is used to determine whether the federal entities overseeing the project should issue a Finding of No Significant Impact, also called a FONSI, which deems the project does not cause meaningful damage to the environment.

That assessment is expected in November, said Ouray County Planning Tech Dan Hughes. It will incorporate several stakeholder opinions, including concerns outlined in a letter from Colorado Parks and Wildlife, which was debated by planning commissioners.

During the meeting Hughes introduced another condition to the special use permit which requires the project to comply with best practices presented in the environmental assessment.

Planning Commissioner Kate Boehnke noted a discrepancy between a CPW-recommended condition included in the special use permit barring construction in the wintertime and plans presented by Project

7 representatives to complete some pipeline installation through river crossings during the winter to mitigate risk to humans, when water levels are low.

She also noted another wildlife protection measure recommended by CPW, missing from the special use permit's conditions.

Both discrepancies were included as conditions stipulated by the permit, along with the environmental assessment condition presented by Hughes and another referencing overall compliance with state and federal regulations.

Though Planning Commissioner Jennifer Cram said she wanted stronger language concerning the post-construction monitoring of impacts on downstream fisheries and recreation at the reservoir, the commission ultimately determined that such regulations fell under the purview of federal and state agencies.

Planning commissioners hardly discussed visual impact concerns, mitigated by previous redesigns by Project 7 and the purchase of an abutting land parcel in July.

Next steps

The environmental assessment will likely be made available for a public hearing in December before the Colorado Depart-

ment of Public Health and Environment, the Bureau of Reclamation and the Bureau of Land Management collectively issue a FONSI, Project 7 Program Manager Rick Huggins said.

It is unclear whether that assessment will be ready before the county commissioners' hearing on Dec. 17. It's up to the commissioners to decide if they want to require the assessment before making a decision, Hughes said.

Project construction is expected to begin in the spring of 2025 with an anticipated finish by the beginning of 2028, but Graham told planning commissioners they aim to have the facility online by 2027.

Adam Turner, the manager for Project 7's existing treatment plant, told the Plaindealer the authority does not have a total price tag for construction or estimated cost changes for water users.

Though CDPHE is the project's primary funder, Turner said Project 7 is actively pursuing grants, including a \$30 million request through the Bureau of Reclamation's water recycling and reuse program and \$1.5 million worth of congressionally directed spending requests.

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