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# Millions of tax dollars spent on wastewater plans, but city has little to show

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By Amanda LaBrot, Reporter  CONNECT

HATTIESBURG, MS (WDAM) - Hattiesburg city leaders have tried to find a way to treat and dispose of the city's wastewater for almost a decade, but after years of disagreement between the city council and the mayor and millions of tax dollars spent, leaders have little to show for it.

"Wastewater is one of those things that doesn't ever go away," Hattiesburg Mayor Johnny DuPree said. "I mean, you always have problems with wastewater. I guess when we ultimately realized that there was a problem was probably after Katrina. When Katrina toppled all of our paddle aerators, the smell came, and we started having real issues not being able to meet the nutrient levels and the requirements of the EPA. It became increasingly worse as the more the tried to fix it, and that's when we knew we had to do something and that's the the EPA and MDEQ stepped in and Gulf Restoration Network, so we ended up where we are now."

From the stench to switching plans, Hattiesburg's wastewater problems have cost taxpayers for almost a decade.

"Spending money is a part of getting where you want to," DuPree said. "It's that old adage you have to spend money to make money. I mean, it's a necessary evil if you say, but people want to know what they're getting."

An On Your Side investigation looked into what Hattiesburg residents received from years engineering designs, lawsuits, disagreements, sludge removal and found the city spent almost \$25 million in taxpayer dollars.

"Well, I think you're trying to lump everything into one," DuPree said. "I think you've got to be, I don't know where you're getting your figures from and you may be correct, but I don't think you can lump everything that's spent on engineering or spent on wastewater because I don't know who you talked to. I don't know where you got those figures from, but if you asked for all the figures for attorney's fees, ask for all the figures for engineers, I mean I don't know what you're looking at."

The invoices used in the On Your Side investigation came from the city and list how much money was spent with a number of different companies.

The city changed treatment plans multiple times. Those changes often came with court dates and attorneys fees to get out of contracts, which contributed to the high total cost.

"Council basically decided we're first were looking at mechanical," DuPree said. "They kind of morphed from mechanical to land application. Some of us believed that mechanical was the best way to go. Others believed that land application was the best way to go, and so for a while, we were running down the same track."

Ward 1 City Councilman Kim Bradley explained the plan changes came from disagreements between the council and the administration.

"That was politics," Bradley said. "The council had one idea. The mayor had another idea, and for us to mutually achieve that goal, we had to run both paths."

Running both paths meant spending money on two sets of plans - one for a mechanical treatment system and one for a land application treatment system - to reach a single solution.

"At some point when council just decided that land application was the way they wanted to go," DuPree said. "Basically, we stopped working on mechanical, and I was in agreement that we needed to stop. We needed to stop spending money going down the same track if you are, if we are going to do land application we need to stop spending money on mechanical. So we stopped about 75 percent done with those plans. And so the agreement was to continue down land application until just ran out of space, ran out of road, ran out of oxygen. There was nothing else that we could do, that anybody could do to revive it. And that's what happened. Well so next, was to go back to mechanical because that was the only other way that we could treat the nutrients was with mechanical. I think it had to do with philosophical differences. Going green, not going green. They both were about the same cost except for the fact that land application seemed to cost some human capital. Upsetting our friends, and when I say friends, I'm talking about people in other counties, people in other communities. It just became such one of those contentious things, and it just seems that at the end, mechanical was the best way to go, which a lot of us thought from the beginning. Even the council thought that mechanical was the best way to go from the beginning."

Bradley said, "I still feel today if we had to do it tomorrow, the land app was the best way."

Engineering plans for wastewater treatment cost taxpayers more than \$8 million, and Bradley said neither plan is being used.

"We don't have to worry about either one of them now," Bradley said. "It was a business decision, and sometimes you make decisions with the best information that you have. It doesn't always go your way, and this is one of the cases where it didn't. It wasn't something that the council and the mayor went and concocted in the back room that we've got to start spending all this money. We were told, and we agreed in the court that this is what we needed to do. We were following and doing what we were supposed to do. Sure, we spent a lot of money, but those plans, if we build a mechanical plant, those plans are still in place. They'll take them down, dust them off."

DuPree said the city often spends money on plans in hopes of eventually receiving grant to fund projects.

"Do you know how many plans and specs that we pay for? Things that are on the shelf right now?" DuPree said. "They're not looking to cut your head open and see what is it you're really talking about? You've got to have the plans and specs ready, which means you've got to spend money. We have plans on the shelf right now that we've spent money on hoping that it'll work, and that's why we've been able to get grants. Certainly I wish it were less. I mean, God knows I wish it were less because we'd use that money for some other things."

DuPree may wish it cost less, but said he does not think the taxpayer money spent was wasted.

"Did we waste money getting to this point? Well, you know, that's relative," DuPree said. "Someone sitting around Monday morning quarterbacking can say yes and someone can say no. I'll leave that up to the people out there. All I know is that we were going up 150 to 200 percent on the fees, and we didn't. We ended up going up 50 percent on fees, and then we ended up reducing that even lower. I know we were looking at \$135 million spending. We didn't spend \$135 million. Maybe we spent \$5 (million), maybe we spent 10 (million), but it was a good exercise if we did all of that and we ended up (with) a process that we can all be satisfied with. And we have the possibility of having a project on the shelf that is almost complete that puts us in line for monies when and if they become available."

Bradley agrees the money was not wasted.

"No it was not," Bradley said. "It was not wasted money. It was money that had to be spent, but you could sit there and make an argument, I know, that you spent \$5 or \$6 million with an engineering firm to draw a mechanical plant, and now you're not getting anything for your money. Well, no. We have something for the money. It's when that day comes, we've already invested in the system."

Bradley said the city's current plan is to keep its wastewater lagoons, Hattiesburg's current treatment system, functioning well to at least carry the city through its next set of state and federal requirements, but hopefully forever.

"As long as the city does it's job, we should be fine," Bradley said. "The earliest that we could have to change compliance would be 2025, and they (the Environmental Protection Agency, Mississippi Department of Environmental Quality, Gulf Restoration Network) would announce our new permit in 2020 of what they expect in 2025. So we are good until 2025. That doesn't mean that prior to that we won't have to start building a new system, but as long as we're in compliance, we have an argument that this lagoon system should be able to stay forever."

<b>Project:</b>	COMSWIP - I & I Study	Task Order #3
<b>Funding:</b>	Water/Sewer Bond Issue	
<b>Budget:</b>	\$2,125,000	Design = 9% \$0.00
<b>Budget Type:</b>	% of Construction	CM = 7% \$0.00
<b>Consultant:</b>	Shows, Dearman, & Waits	
<b>Consultant's Project #:</b>	11202	
<b>Account:</b>	105695.6015	105695.6015
<b>MSB</b>	2015-49	

Shows, Dearman, & Waits						
Date	Invoice #	Check Date	Phase	Check Number	Invoice Amount	Budget Balance
					Total Paid to Date	\$2,125,000.00
4/13/15	18469				\$ 44,991.82	44,991.82 \$2,080,008.18
6/25/15	18562				5,156.91	50,148.73 \$2,074,851.27
7/23/15	18645				62,926.60	113,075.33 \$2,011,924.67
9/21/15	18700				109,894.02	222,969.35 \$1,902,030.65
9/21/15	18701				275,026.88	497,996.23 \$1,627,003.77
10/19/15	18753				289,876.95	787,873.18 \$1,337,126.82
11/19/15	18806				498,572.36	1,286,445.54 \$838,554.46
12/16/15	18843				141,420.83	1,427,866.37 \$697,133.63
1/29/16	18897				122,543.61	1,550,409.98 \$574,590.02
2/18/16	18950				212,936.64	1,763,346.62 \$361,653.38
3/22/16	19006				287,098.22	2,050,444.84 \$74,555.26

Y:\Budget Progress Report - 2015\I & I Study - Task #3

<b>Project:</b>	COMSWIP - I & I Study	Task Order 2
<b>Funding:</b>	Water/Sewer Bond Issue	

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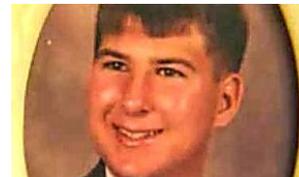
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