



# City Talks Millions In Proposed Water Fixes, Resident Pushback Over Sidewalk Project

By Beth Milligan | March 9, 2021

Infrastructure was a key topic of discussion for Traverse City commissioners Monday as staff reviewed a new study highlighting millions of dollars in recommended fixes to the city's water system in the coming years, as well as a planned April start date to construction on 4.52 miles of sidewalk and trail expansion around 10 local schools. The sidewalk project has already been approved, with funding in place and contractors secured – but some residents who are required to remove illegal fences from their yards to make way for the new sidewalks are unhappy about the plan.

The state of Michigan requires communities like Traverse City to conduct a reliability study of their water system every five years. Consulting group Hubbell, Roth & Clark conducted the most recent analysis of the Traverse City water treatment and distribution

system. The report contained some good news, determining the current system is adequate for the local population needs. “We got a good report on it overall...we have a good reliable system,” City Director of Municipal Utilities Art Krueger told commissioners.

But the report also noted that water demand in the coming years could require the city to upgrade key parts of its system – and highlighted numerous short- and long-term projects needed to boost its reliability, performance, and capacity. The report recommended \$8.9 million in projects in the next five years alone, including \$2.1 million in water treatment plant repairs and \$6.8 million in distribution system improvements. Projects include pump, valve, and tank replacements and electrical upgrades at the plant and major distribution pipe upgrades around town, including in Central and Boardman neighborhoods, parts of downtown, and Veterans Drive, among others. The report also flagged potential water pressure issues in certain hilly neighborhoods, such as Wayne Hill and Grand Traverse Commons.

City Manager Marty Colburn said the study will help staff and commissioners this spring as they plan the 2021-22 budget, which must be approved by the board by June. Some of the water system projects are already on the city’s radar and are included in the capital improvement plan (CIP) – a document that outlines major planned city projects on an annual basis – but other fixes will need to be slotted into the queue in the years ahead. “We’re not going to try and solve all these in one year,” said Colburn. Noting that multiple townships also rely on the city’s water and sewer infrastructure – and that Hubbell, Roth & Clark stated in its report that the highest percentage of population growth is expected to occur in Garfield Township – some commissioners asked how project costs would be shared among communities.

“How much of it is on us versus the townships?” said Commissioner Christie Minervini. Colburn said it “depends literally project to project” on whether costs are shared by neighboring townships and to what degree, but said those partners would likely be responsible for picking up at least some of the tab for system upgrades. City water rate increases could also help fund improvements, though Krueger said the scope of some projects would likely require the city borrowing funds as well. “We understand we don’t have unlimited funds,” he said, adding his department would work to bring back realistic options for projects based on “what we can afford.” Mayor Jim Carruthers acknowledged that the city has a “big chunk of old infrastructure to maintain and fix” on a limited amount of funding, but also stressed the importance of water quality to residents. “We’re the land of clean water, and we want to maintain that classification,” he said.

Infrastructure also came up in a staff update Monday on the planned start of construction next month on 4.52 miles of sidewalk and trail upgrades – plus bike lane, traffic calming, and signal improvements – around 10 local schools as part of the Safe Routes to School program. State funding is covering the bulk of project costs at over \$2 million. Team Elmer’s has the contract for construction and is following a schedule that will minimize work around the direct vicinity of schools while classes are still in session, with a majority of the most disruptive work to take place this summer. The project is expected to be substantially complete by October.

As part of the engineering process, staff worked to save trees whenever possible – with a current tally of 33 trees that will need to be removed to make way for new sidewalks. Tree removal is scheduled to start March 31 and be complete by April 4. Colburn noted that the city is working to plant more trees elsewhere, with an order for 176 new trees – 156 of which will be planted in the city and 20 at Hickory Hills – to appear on the next city commission agenda for approval.

Staff also evaluated private properties that will be affected by the sidewalk construction and flagged multiple sites where owners had illegally built fences in the city right-of-way. Some of those property owners have sent angry emails to staff and commissioners trying to fight orders to remove the fences or else have them removed by the city to accommodate the new sidewalks. While some commissioners asked Monday why the city couldn’t compromise on certain sites – like making the sidewalk slightly narrower than the standard six feet wide to allow a fence to stay up – Colburn and City Engineer Tim Lodge both said it was important to enforce city rules as consistently as possible among property owners.

City Commissioner Tim Werner also said it was important for the city to build its infrastructure with longevity and the future in mind, noting that “our lives are short” and that while fences and houses might come and go on properties, the sidewalks themselves could last hundreds of years. Commissioner Brian McGillivary also said it was the responsibility of property owners to know where their property lines are and not make improvements on city-owned land.

“It’s very disappointing (to have to remove improvements), but fences are cheap, and that’s why everyone tells you to get a survey first,” he said. Lodge said the city understands that amenities like fences are “near and dear to property owners” and said staff tries to work with residents, but also said the city faces funding and routing

restrictions for new sidewalks – like trees, utility poles, and enough sidewalk width to accommodate all users – that can necessitate fence removal. “We try to proceed with uniformity so that everybody is being treated the same,” he said.

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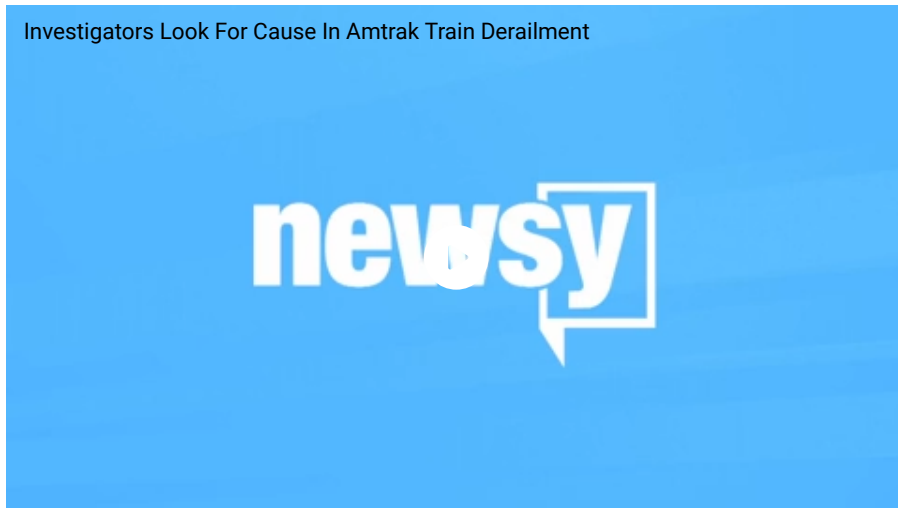
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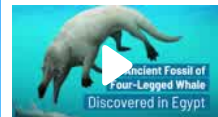
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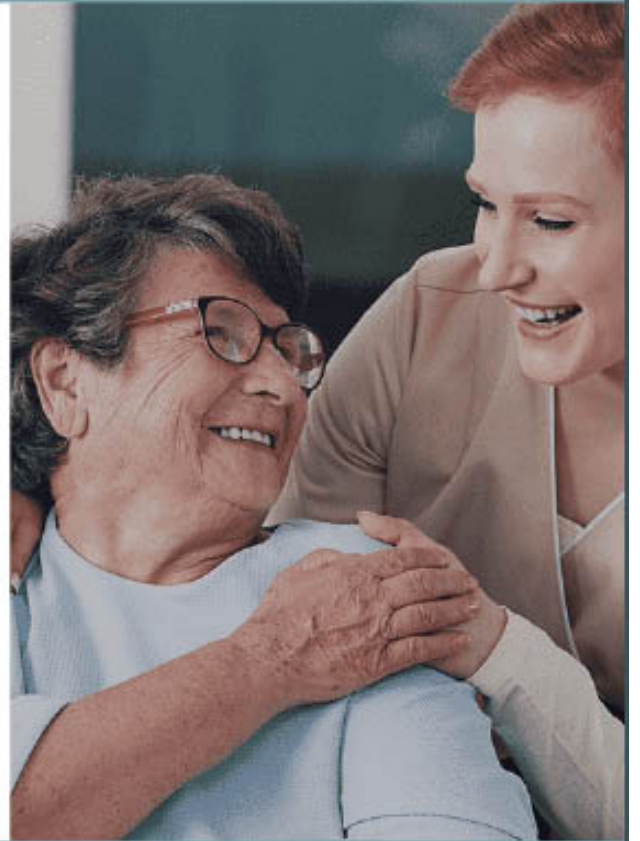
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