

MSF proposes management district

By Jeanne Davant

Underneath the ground lies one of Manitou's most important assets: the aquifer that feeds our mineral springs.

The springs that bubble up through the ground have been attracting people to the region for centuries and gave the city its name.

The Mineral Springs Foundation, which was formed more than 20 years ago to develop, protect and promote the springs, now is concerned about their continued maintenance. The foundation proposed that City Council consider a groundwater management district that would regulate and protect the aquifer, and asked Council on Tuesday to provide more support for maintaining the springs.

The discussion came at a work session during which foundation President Dave Wolverton presented the findings of a multi-year study of the aquifer.

Wolverton said the foundation sees some big projects ahead, including a complete overhaul of the Seven-Minute Spring.

The city used to have primary responsibility for maintaining the springs, but under an agreement signed in March 2009, the foundation provides \$8,000 a year for maintenance, with the city matching that amount.

"We found that's not enough," Wolverton said. "We funded everything over \$16,000 ourselves, and in the past five years we have spent \$100,000." He added that the foundation is being billed for items such as light bills in the parks.

Public Works Director Bruno Pothier said city employees spend up to two hours a day checking and maintaining the springs. Those costs are not billed to the foundation and are in addition to the city's \$8,000 maintenance contribution.

Wolverton said the foundation now would like to see the city take over funding for maintenance of the springs. The board concluded that maintenance was not part of its mission statement and "wants to focus on ... fundraising and publicity."

The Mineral Springs Foundation developed eight of the 10 existing springs; the other two are privately owned. Maintenance of the springs is an ongoing issue because the carbonated water is highly corrosive to cement and other materials.

"The premise of the Mineral Springs Foundation was to create and restore the springs," Mineral Springs Foundation member Terry Sharpton said. "When completed, they would be presented to the city."

"I think the city needs to step up and take greater responsibility," Mayor Marc Snyder said, "but speaking practically, we don't have the ability to just print money."

Wolverton said a special groundwater management district could be formed to oversee all matters related to wells within the district, which would encompass Manitou Springs. Because a district would raise money through taxation, it would have to be approved by the voters.

Councilwoman Aimee Cox said three other taxing districts have been proposed and might be on the next ballot, including a countywide parks district that could involve an increase in Manitou residents' taxes even if Manitou voters don't support it.

But Snyder said he thinks "our citizens, given the right proposal, would be very open to creating something to fund maintenance of the springs."

Council members said they would evaluate the foundation's request to take on additional funding for maintenance at midyear but declined to consider amending the 2009 agreement.

"We're going to go through the budget in July," Councilman Rick Barry said. "We have a finite amount of budget. Council has to look at these meager resources and how to parcel out what we have. We will have to look at our resources then."

Wolverton said the foundation has been measuring the temperature and pressure in five of the spring wells since 2006. In 2009, the foundation and the city hired water resource and environmental consultants John Shomaker and Associates to do an in-depth study of the aquifer.

The consultants' report contains an analysis of the geology and hydrology of the springs and recommends continued monitoring of the watershed and conservation measures to protect it.

The study identified the Rampart shooting range as one of the main sources of possible contamination from lead, human waste and trash. Although the shooting range is closed, it remains a potential source of contamination because water drains from the range into Williams Canyon. The report recommends that the city monitor a study that is being contemplated by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to determine if that's happening.

The report also noted that nitrates indicating contamination from wastewater have been found in several springs. A 1997 study concluded that this contamination probably came from the Cave of the Winds' wastewater treatment system. Tests conducted for the Shomaker study, however, did not find nitrates except in the Blue Ice Springs in Williams Canyon, and the amounts did not exceed EPA maximum standards.

"There may be local sources, including septic tanks," the study said. "Continuing attention to wellhead and other water-quality protection, including efforts to eliminate potential sources of contamination, is definitely justified."

Because the water in the aquifer is under pressure that needs to be maintained to support the flow of the springs and health of the aquifer, the report recommends careful attention to procedures for drilling or abandoning wells and protection from the effects of blasting and excavations.

All of these issues could be addressed by a groundwater management district, Wolverton said.

The full report is posted on the city's Web site, www.manitouspringsgov.com, and can be accessed through the Reports, Plans and Maps link.

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