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### Williams awaits penalty

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Water quality board will weigh in on city's noncompliance

By Robert Parsons/For the Appeal-Democrat

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Now that Williams voters have rejected a special district assessment for a \$25 million wastewater treatment plant, city officials say they have to find another way to fund the project.

"We've done everything we could do to meet the February deadline," Mayor Patricia Ash said.

The city has been out of compliance with federal and state wastewater treatment standards since 2005 and has already been fined \$2.1 million by the Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control Board.

An extension agreement last year gave the city until 2010 to meet the standards.

However, the extension was contingent on securing money for the new plant by Friday.

"Now that we have failed to meet that funding deadline, we're out of compliance," Ash said. "So, really we're just circling the wagons and, essentially, waiting to hear from the Regional Water Quality Control Board."

Board spokesman Ken Landau said the next step will be to talk to city officials about options.

"If Williams is unable to achieve compliance in a timely manner, then they would be subject to enforcement," Landau said.

He said the exact nature of the "enforcement" has to be determined on a "case-by-case" basis, but that realistically the city could be facing millions of dollars in fines and penalties.

"That is obviously only the worst-case scenario - and I must stress that it's still too early and the board has not even had a chance to meet with Williams city officials yet," Landau said. "But, yes, certainly, those fines are very possible. It just depends on the city's options."

Landau said he had no way of knowing when the city may start to be fined again and would not speculate on the amount of any potential fines.

The city of Dixon in Solano County, which has had its own wastewater regulation troubles, was fined \$220,000 just last week for noncompliance, he said.

Jerome Fournier, the financial consultant hired to help Williams, said the city's options are limited.

"Legally, we have to wait one full year before we could bring another special district proposal back to the voters, and that was the best and cheapest solution available," Fournier said.

He said all other realistic options are limited and more expensive to voters than the special district would have been. One option would be to raise current sewer rates to a level that would fund the construction.

Should the city decide to raise rates, Fournier estimated that each sewer user would see about an \$85 increase in monthly bills, which, he said, would make monthly sewer payments of about \$120.

"That's why we felt the district was the best option," Fournier said. "With the district, everyone would pay an additional \$470 annually, but, should they decide to raise rates - which they have not talked about yet - everyone would be paying nearly \$1,500 per year."

Landau said the state "ultimately does care" about the financial hardships placed on small communities to meet the federal and state regulations.

"But, a city's ability to pay is not a factor in determining the importance of clean water," he said. "Whether you're a rich community or a poor one, everyone wants to have clean water."

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