

Oswego OKs radium removal pact

New system expected to bring water into conformance with Federal rules

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Village of Oswego water customers should begin receiving water that is virtually free of radium sometime next spring as a result of action taken by the village board during a special meeting Monday evening.

Board members ended months of negotiations between village attorneys, staff and WRT Environmental by voting unanimously to award a contract to the Colorado-based firm to install a filter system at each of the village's five wells. The WRT system is designed to remove the naturally-occurring radium from the water.

Under terms of the 20 year agreement a second company, R.M.D. Services, will oversee the operation of the equipment and the removal and disposal of the radium collected by the WRT system.

Village President Craig Weber said village public works staff will continue to oversee the operation of each of the village's wells.

"Our people will be trained to work with the (WRT) system, but there won't be much work involved," Weber said.

Weber noted the WRT system will not serve as a water softener.

"If people want soft water, they will still need a water softener in their homes," he said.

Mark Pries, the village's finance director, estimated the village's cost to install the WRT system at about \$2.8 million, about \$1.2 million less than the estimated \$4 million cost for a conventional radium removal system.

The annual added operational cost to the village for the WRT system is based upon a sliding scale spanning the life of the contract. Pries said the initial cost will be about \$164,000 which will increase to \$410,000 by the final year of the contract in 2023. A factor in the increase will be the need for additional WRT equipment as new wells are constructed to provide water for the growing village. (To pay for the added operational costs, the village's engineering firm has recommended the village increases its water rates. See adjacent article.)

Like many other municipalities in northeastern Illinois, Oswego was notified by the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency (IEPA) in 1984 that concentrations of radium in its water supply were in excess of regulations set by the U.S. EPA. The radium is found in the deep well aquifers from which the village and numerous other area municipalities pump their water.

According to the U.S. EPA regulations, the acceptable level of radium is no more than 5.0 pico curies per liter. (A pico means a trillionth; a curie is a measure of radioactivity.) The radium content in village water has ranged over the years between six and 18 pico curies.

The U.S. EPA adopted the radium regulations after studies done in the 1970s linked concentrations of radium in drinking water with some forms of cancer, including cancer of the bone and sinus. However, over the years, village officials have consistently maintained the radium concentration in municipal water does not pose a significant health risk. They have cited the results of a 1985 study conducted by a researcher at the Argonne National Laboratory that determined someone would have to drink two liters of water containing 10 pico curies of radium every day for 6,000 years in order to ingest enough radium to risk cancer.

The WRT equipment utilizes a patent pending filter system approved by the IEPA. The village would be the first public water supplier to use the system in the nation.

The board chose the WRT system based upon the recommendation of its engineering consultants, Smith Engineering, Inc. of Yorkville.

To accommodate the WRT system equipment, additions will be constructed at each of the village's well houses. Weber said the additions would have been necessary regardless of the type of radium removal system the board chose.

Weber said he expects construction to start at each of the wells later this year with all of the equipment in place and operational by late next spring.

"The important thing at this point is the contract is in place and we are moving forward," he added.

Village will miss IEPA deadline

The village will miss a previously set IEPA deadline of Dec. 31 to have the radium removal equipment installed and operational. By missing the deadline, the village could risk IEPA fines. However, village officials have said previously they do not expect any fines since the IEPA is aware of the village's efforts to date and has been supportive of the WRT system.

"This is the most environmentally sound and cost effective method to deal with this problem," Carrie Hansen, village administrator, told the board Monday evening.

Weber noted the village previously tried to remedy the radium problem by blending water from its deep wells with water from a single shallow well which the village had constructed in the Kendall Point Business Center just west of U.S. Route 34. Water from the shallow well did not contain radium.

However, the village was forced to shut the shallow well after water pumped from the well was found to contain high concentrations of rust.

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