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Treatment plant a decade in the making begins operation

Chairman Young starts up facility Tuesday, October 28 at 2:39 p.m.

by BETH ALTENA

of the pockets of the northern communities' citizens.

"We came home and looked at each other and said, 'What did we just hear?' Eadie described of the start of one of the most monumental tasks undertaken by the communiites during her long years on Rockford City Council. "It was the seeds of something that wouldn't cost our taxpayers a horrendous amount of money," she stated.

See **TREATMENT PLANT FIRES UP**, page 14

It took a decade to realize and five communities to make it happen, but this week the North Kent Sewer Authority's clean water treatment plant began operations. A deadline to end a 40-plus year agreement for sewage treatment is November 1, and according to Chairman of the North Kent Sewer Authority and Rockford City Manager Michael Young, the plant will be flowing at full capacity on time.

Council member Mary Eadie recalled the early days when the plant was a glimmer of hope for what seemed a raw deal in sewage treatment for the City of Rockford and the townships of Alpine, Cannon, Courtland and Plainfield.

Leaders had heard the plan for paying for costs of new pipes and treatment for sewer treatment provider the City of Grand Rapids. It seemed to be coming straight out



SAVINGS FOR THE ENVIRONMENT—As well as savings to citizens in the City of Rockford and the townships of Alpine, Cannon, Courtland and Plainfield. A plant that has been in the works for ten years began treating sewage Tuesday, October 28 and will process 4.3 million gallons daily. The open tank pictured above is now filled and functional with life preservers around the perimeter in case someone accidentally falls in. Michael Young holds a preserver.

TREATMENT PLANT FIRES UP

From page 1



STYLISH—The main office of the treatment plant is appealing. "It's part of the promise we made to Plainfield Township residents," said Michael Young. "We told them this would not look like a wastewater treatment plant." The two story building also allows mechanicals (air conditioning, electrical, heating, etc.) to be housed in the upper half, limiting the need for additional outbuildings on the property.

Young has been involved in organizing the project since day one. It has been a nearly \$50 million dollar cooperative effort and resulted in the ninth largest plant of its kind in the country. It is such a showcase facility for treatment of this kind that suppliers knocked \$200,000 off the price for an agreement to be able to offer other prospective plant builders tours here.

The PARCCside (named for partners Plainfield, Alpine, Rockford, Cannon and Courtland) waste water treatment plant is located on 30 acres at 4775 Coit Avenue NE, in Plainfield Township and is now processing 4.3 million gallons of wastewater a day—and releasing a product that is cleaner than the Grand River is at present. Supporters insist Young will drink a glass of the effluent when the opening is celebrated at a public open house next month.

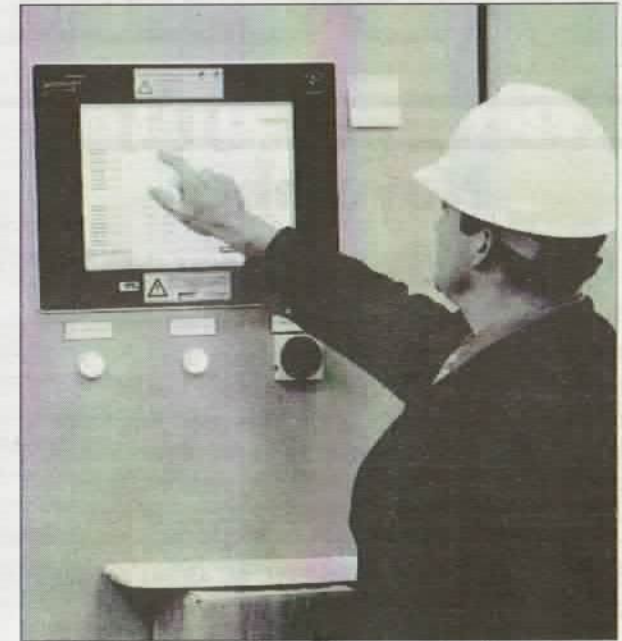
Visitors who tour the plant will receive an education in the most technologically advanced aspects of treating waste. Instead of an odorous, chemically intensive treatment process that also relies on gravity to settle solid waste to the bottom, the plant uses natural bacteria, motion, membranes and air to clean raw sewage to a nearly pure effluent. According to Young, the plant—as is—should serve member communities without

upgrades for 30 years. After 30 years a four million gallon a day upgrade is anticipated.

"This plant is built for the future," Young stated. "The old way was to dump enough chlorine in to kill the bacteria. After, a second chemical is needed to remove the chlorine. It was pretty hazardous... In this plant there is no chlorine. As an alternative this process uses ultraviolet light to mutate the bacteria so it cannot reproduce. The plant is so automated it can be operated remotely from anywhere."

The stimulus for some organizers to build their own plant was simply to control the costs for citizens rather than sign a contract that was open-ended in costs and unsatisfactory in theory. For others, an important aspect of building from scratch was to remove the four million gallons of flow a day into an old, leaking system that dumped millions of gallons of untreated sewage into the Grand River every time there was a heavy rainfall. "We're removing four million gallons of flow a day [from the old plant], Young said. "It's hard to gauge which is more important."

The planning process has been a long one, scoffed at by opponents in the beginning who said the five members would



READY, SET, GO!—Michael Young pushes the touchscreen prompt that put the new wastewater treatment plant online Tuesday, October 28 at 2:39 p.m.



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build the plant "when pigs fly." Negotiation to come to a compromise was resisted as one after another of the townships considered the idea and worked out cost sharing plans. When all but one community—Alpine Township—had signed on, Young, Grand Rapids elected officials and staff were in attendance to present to Alpine Township Board at their request. They promised to work with the township to contain costs by staying on with the existing provider. With all five needed to realize the plan, one partner dropping out would have ended the plan. In a tension-laden half hour, the vote split evenly only to be swung by the remaining fifth board member, who took his time announcing his decision, but finally voted for the new treatment plant.

Tense meetings aside, the years of working toward this common goal have resulted in a new era of close ties between the partner municipalities. Young said the City of Rockford and nearby townships had at one time been somewhat distrustful of each other, in part, due to worries over annexation. "Over the past 100 years we've annexed from each of them," Young said of Plainfield, Cannon and Courtland townships. Young said the city has never pursued annexation, but only responded

FINAL STEPS—Ultraviolet lights ensure that bacteria in the final product of treatment cannot reproduce. Here water is shown being run through the processing step where it is exposed to the lights. This picture looks so cool in color. See it online at www.rockfordsquire.com.

to requests from citizens who desired to be annexed to enjoy city services. Close ties with Alpine Township had never been very developed. "Alpine township just seemed so far away," he said.

With the strong working relationship developed during a decades-worth of planning the waste treatment plant, Young said trust and cooperation have built up over other issues shared between the close communities. An example is the determination to preserve the character of the Ten Mile corridor from US 131 to Rockford. Other benefits are the DARE programs the townships share and work together to maintain and joint ventures such as a maintenance of Krause Memorial Library, located in the City of Rockford but used by many Rockford-area residents.

Young also looks forward to the education opportunity the plant provides. He has received requests from cities in other countries to visit and receive advice on building a plant of their own. Providers of the membranes, a technologically very important process in the cleaning of the waste, plan to bring prospective buyers in to see the state-of-the-art facility. It may also help students realize an important part of the services the government provides on a local level. Young said he talks to school groups, and realizes youngsters have little idea what goes on to provide them with clean water at home and take away wastes.

"I ask them, 'What does the City of Rockford do for you?' Nobody knows. I say, 'When you pull the plug in the bathtub, do you know where the water goes?' They don't know. They know about fire and police, but that's about it." He looks forward to educating kids and adults alike in this process. "We'll take school groups, scout groups, anybody and everybody."

Young said a public ceremony and ribbon cutting will take place soon. The curious or those who would like to congratulate organizers of the plant will have the opportunity. For a plant with a very practical, and somewhat unglamorous role in our daily lives, it is an inspiring story about happy endings.

"This is clearly the way of the future for waste water treatment," Young insisted. "It's really pretty simple. It's pure mother nature." On Tuesday, October 28, builders and contractors looked on as Young pushed the computer touch screen, starting the plant for operation. "It was a little emotional," said Young. "It was an exciting moment today

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