

Long wait for clean tap water drags on in Browning, East Glacier Park

BY TRAVIS COLEMAN • TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER • JUNE 14, 2009

BROWNING — In the spring of 2003, the end of a decades-long wait to deliver pristine drinking water from a nearby reservoir to the taps of East Glacier Park and Browning residents was said to be about a year away as construction continued on a multimillion dollar treatment plant.



Juddson Reevis and Johnna LaPlante move jugs from a family-run water business in Browning. The venture was created to provide residents with clean water to drink. (TRIBUNE PHOTO/TRAVIS COLEMAN)

Six years later, piles of 5-gallon water jugs have become something of a fixture on the inside and outside of Lloyd and Lila Reevis' home in Browning. The two, along with their daughters, have spent most of the last six years operating Blackfeet Bottled Water, selling and

delivering drinking water to local residents, schools and businesses. The business was started out of necessity, considering how contaminated the tap water was — and continues to be — in this town on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation. "We want to provide clean water for the people because the water is no good around here," said Lloyd Reevis.

For nearly 30 years, local, tribal, state and federal officials have tried to solve the water-supply problem in Browning and East Glacier. East Glacier's untreated surface water isn't safe to drink. Browning's well water is also of poor quality and insufficient quantity for the town. The solution to the water woes is supposed to be the Blackfeet Community Water Project, which will draw water from the nearby Lower Two Medicine Lake Reservoir.

When Gov. Brian Schweitzer in July 2007 joined tribal and state officials in the middle of a forest north of East Glacier for the water-treatment plant's groundbreaking, it was again said that in a year the days of amber-colored or foggy drinking water mixed with sediment would be a thing of the past. But instead, the project's funding dried up, and work on the project stalled.

"Water, water everywhere but not a drop to drink," said T.J. Show, executive secretary on the Blackfeet Tribe's business council. That old mariner lyric has for generations described life for those living along the Rocky Mountain Front and the gateway to Glacier National Park. But, thanks to an influx of stimulus cash and the persistence of local officials, another familiar tune is being sung — that the project could be finished in a year.

That was the announcement made during a meeting between the Browning City Council and members of the Browning School District

on Thursday. Browning Mayor Willie Morris said the city and Indian Health Service have recently applied for \$2 million in grants from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Development Agency. If granted, the money would pick up the remaining tab of the project's second phase, which is the completion of the treatment plant and water tank north of East Glacier.

Also, the project has secured \$600,000 from the tribe, and an additional allotment of \$600,000 in stimulus cash from the Montana Department of Commerce is being considered by the tribe, according to Tribal Business Council Chairman Willie Sharp, Jr. Emmie Davis Bird of the tribe's Planning Department said that when the project's second phase is complete, the start of the third and final phase can begin. That phase includes the construction of a pipeline from the Lower Two Medicine through East Glacier and into Browning. Morris said that if construction bids go out soon, the entire project could be finished by next spring. Thursday's meeting was held to discuss water-pressure issues at the new Browning High School. A tentative agreement was reached between the city and the school district to reconfigure the city's current water system to provide for the new school. All in attendance agreed that if the Blackfeet water project were complete, this move would not have been needed.

Also in attendance at the meeting was Bill Grant of the East Glacier Water and Sewer District. Grant has been involved with the district since about 1982 and has been affiliated with the pursuit of a potable water source for East Glacier for nearly 30 years. Grant said East Glacier's water system dates back to at least 1910. Because of the water's poor quality, the district was mostly unable to collect water fees from its members and later defaulted on its loans from the USDA. The USDA, the district and the tribe teamed up to find a solution, and it was brought up that Browning also had a problem with water quality and quantity. The tribe, the Indian Health Service and the district then decided to seek a new water source together, Grant said.

Stu Miller, with the tribe's planning department, and the Indian Health Service soon came up with the idea to draw from the Lower Two Medicine. The district agreed, and so the Blackfeet Community Water Project was born. After construction began in 2002, the project's first phase — the installation of an intake system at the Lower Two Medicine — was completed in 2003 for about \$1.9 million, Bird said.

Then a series of unforeseen events led to the project stalling, according to officials. First, construction costs jumped because of the cost of materials and fuel. Officials moved forward with the project despite being aware that funding for the second phase would not match the rising cost of construction, Grant said. The project's total estimated cost of between \$12 and \$15 million ballooned, and progress stopped after a funding shortfall of about \$1.6 million in September 2008. The second phase is about 85 percent complete, Bird said. Money is still needed to install the plant's membrane system and to train people to operate the system. The tribe wanted to continue to pursue the project because of its importance to the community, Bird said. In addition to the rising cost of construction, Show said that tribal officials had trouble securing funding from agencies. "We were told things that didn't come to light," Show said. And Miller, one of the tribe's main players involved with treatment plant, died last fall. "He was vital to this organization. He knew the ins and outs. He passed on with all the knowledge," Show said.

One of the agencies funding the project is the state's Treasure State Endowment Program. Program Director James Edgecome said the project has stalled at various times because of funding shortfalls. Edgecome said his program, starting in 1995, awarded three grants totaling about \$1.3 million to help the water project: one to the East Glacier water district for \$306,000 and two \$500,000 grants, one each to the Blackfeet Tribe and the city of Browning. Edgecome added that his agency hasn't ever gotten a clear picture of where the project's funding was coming from and how it was spent. In the past,

it has been said that a large chunk of the project's funding — about \$7 million — came from the USDA's Rural Development Agency. Other sources of cash for the project included the Indian Health Service and the Blackfeet Tribe. "It's very frustrating for everyone involved to not have it up and running," Edgecome said. "That's the way some of these projects go." The water pipeline funding has been secured, Bird said, but she couldn't disclose the funding amount because construction bids have not opened. The delay has caused havoc in East Glacier and Browning, along with complicating the construction of new facilities in Browning.

On a good day in Browning, the tap water runs foggy, said Lloyd Reevis. On a bad day, the water runs dirty. When Lloyd's wife Lila Reevis washes clothes on a bad day, they sometimes come out discolored. "I'm a little leery of taking a shower with this water," Lloyd Reevis said. The sight of boiling water at restaurants and residents buying bottled water from a local grocer has become a part of everyday life in the towns. At the Junction Cafe in Browning, boiling water for drinking has become a part the daily operations. And the water is often hard, corroding in the cafe's coffee machines. For as long as she can remember, employees have had to boil the water to get rid of contaminates, cafe manager Julie Powell said. East Glacier restaurant and business owners are still dealing with the added

expense of buying bottled water to serve their customers. East Glacier locals say the drinking water coming from Midvale Creek can carry disease from dead animals that sometimes pollute the creek.

Grant acknowledges the flack he sometimes gets from East Glacier residents and business owners. "They just know that good things take time," Grant said. The district doesn't really operate much as a board anymore. It mostly just pays for district operations, does quality tests and collects water fees, Grant said. When the plant goes on line, the district has an agreement with the tribe to disband and have the tribe take over its duties, Grant said. "We're just hanging on," Grant said. "What we really want for East Glacier and for the town of Browning is to have a successful finish to the water project." Grant said the project is probably the "last hurrah" for finding a new source of water on the Rocky Mountain Front. When it's finished, it's going to produce some of the best water in the state, he said. Grant has faith the project will be finished, ending the generations of area residents who have grown up without clean tap water. That's a part of life many people can take for granted, he said. On the day the plant finally goes on line, Grant doesn't know how he'll feel, but he knows what he may say. "I can drink from the tap," Grant said.

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