

## County signs off on city water deal - Columbus Dispatch

Written by Administrator  
Wednesday, 15 December 2010 05:02 -

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For decades, Columbus had turned a deaf ear to pleas to provide clean water to hundreds of Franklin County residents forced to truck in water for drinking, cooking and bathing.

This week, county commissioners found the leverage to get Columbus to grant an exception to its annexation-first policy. In exchange for helping Columbus settle an annexation argument with casino developer Penn

National Gaming, the county won water rights for subdivisions where clean water isn't a guarantee.

Columbus policy has been to require annexation into the city before extending water and sewer services to unincorporated pockets of the county.

The contract with Columbus that commissioners approved yesterday set the groundwork for extending city water to Mon-E-Bak Farms, Leonard Park and 21 other neighborhoods.

In return, the county removed sewer service to the site of Penn National's new casino, the former Delphi auto-parts plant in western Franklin County.

But that doesn't mean crystal-clear water is going to start flowing from faucets in those neighborhoods today - or anytime soon.

The agreement gives the county the right to extend water. Now, it has to find the money and the time. Early next year, the county will begin studying how much extending water would cost, said Stephen Renner, county sanitary engineer.

Franklin County has been pushing Columbus for about 20 years to extend water without annexation, county Administrator Don L. Brown said.

Water problems have hurt property values, and many of these neighborhoods have been

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struggling with vacancy rates. But the biggest problem, commissioners said, is the quality of life.

"Not having clean water is something you associate with Third World countries," Commissioner Paula Brooks said.

There are people in Leonard Park, a neighborhood in Mifflin Township, who have to carry in all their water.

Matt Bowen and his family members take shifts driving their truck to the Mifflin Township maintenance building to fill two, 330-gallon tanks of water and haul them 2 miles back to a cistern running into their Georgia Avenue home.

"It's terrible," said Bowen, 22, who started hauling water three years ago. "Everybody's well around here dried up."

Township Trustee Lynn Stewart said the wells started drying up in the 1970s when construction of I-270 disrupted the aquifer.

She said residents didn't want to annex because they liked the personal touch of township police and services. They also didn't want to switch from Gahanna-Jefferson schools to Columbus'.

In other neighborhoods, the more-pressing problem is pollution seeping into wells, especially in densely populated subdivisions with aging sanitary sewers that aren't up to the job anymore.

In the 23 neighborhoods contained in the contract, there are 2,500 people who need access to clean water, Brown said.

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Columbus officials hadn't seemed to be in a rush to come to an agreement to extend water to those people without annexation.

Then, city officials ran into trouble in negotiations with Penn National.

"It was an opportunity to bargain with the city that came along and we couldn't pass it up," Brown said. "We had something of value to exchange for something they had of value."

A long-standing county contract obliged Columbus to provide sewer services to the casino even without annexation.

It had been assumed that the casino would be in Columbus. But as city and casino representatives hashed out tax incentives, Penn National representatives started floating the possibility of staying in the township.

If the casino did not annex, it would cost Columbus tax revenue - \$8 million of the \$24 million a year that Columbus is set to make if the casino is within the city limits.

But without sewer services, it would be extremely difficult for the casino to resist annexation.

Negotiations with the county began several weeks ago, around the same time Mayor Michael B. Coleman learned that the casino developers had applied to the state for permits to supply water from wells, an alternative to annexing for city water, said Dan Williamson, the mayor's spokesman.

Discussions continued through this past weekend, but there was no agreement as of Monday morning, Williamson said. But Coleman wanted to work something out with commissioners before government officials took their holiday breaks. The Columbus City Council approved the deal Monday night.

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"The mayor really wants to get this (casino) project started," Williamson said. Meanwhile, the commissioners "got a real win that they've been advocating for these residential areas."

A Penn National spokesman said the city's tactics amounted to "bullying."

Paul Rosile, director of environmental health for Franklin County Public Health, said he never expected to see the city offer water service to the "pockets of pollution" in the county.

"This was something I didn't think would happen in my career," he said.

*Dispatch reporters Doug Caruso and Collin Binkley contributed to this story.*

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