

VALLEY PUBLIC RADIO

Valley Communities Worry USDA Changes Could Hurt Rural Infrastructure

July 18, 2017

By Jeffrey Hess



(left to Right) Farmersville City Manager John Jansons, Director of Public Works Jeff Dolan, and Mayor Paul Boyer

When new presidential administrations come into office, they often make changes to agencies and appoint people who share their political outlook. The same is true under the leadership of President Donald Trump.

However, one seemingly obscure reorganization involving leadership of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's rural development program is sending shockwaves throughout Central California and beyond. One of those concerned is Farmersville Mayor Paul Boyer.

Thanks to the USDA, Boyer has plans to replace the town's 60-year-old wastewater treatment plant which today creates an intense smell in the middle of the California summer.

"As you can see the aerator out there in middle churning the water around aerating it. It also brings some of the air and the waste water up and we are down wind right now. It is not real bad but you wouldn't want to come out here and eat your lunch," Boyer says.

The open air pits contain anything and everything flushed down the drain from human waste to trash in the city of 11,000 in eastern Tulare County.

Boyer is working to build a brand new state-of-the-art wastewater treatment plant and shut the smelly open air plant down. The new plant will make the water much cleaner, with much less nitrogen when it is put back into the earth for groundwater recharge.

To do so, the city has secured a loan for \$5 million from the USDA's Rural Development Department toward the roughly \$18 million sewage treatment plant.

Without that money, Boyer says there is no way they could build the plant.

"When you need that financing, often times the USDA is considered the financier of last resort. And in poor communities like Farmersville, we don't have other options. They are our only resort." Boyer says.

And without the plant, Farmersville can't grow. The old plant is at capacity and any big new home or commercial development would likely have to be blocked as a result. So to continue the economic growth of the entire town, a new plant is a necessity.

It's these projects - the potential growth and health of rural towns - that some are warning are now at risk, thanks to a controversial move by the Trump administration.



Sonny Perdue, the new head of the USDA has eliminated the position of Undersecretary for Rural Development, which has funded projects in Farmersville and many other valley communities for years. Some say it's just a reassignment of duties to another official in the USDA bureaucracy, but others aren't so sure it's a wise move.

Glenda Humiston, the former California director for rural development for the USDA under President Barack Obama, says the result will be less focus on rural towns and communities like Farmersville.

"These kind of programs are just critical. And they are often the only source of any financing for critical infrastructure too, community facilities, broadband, rural health clinics," Humiston says.

The program also pays for things like animal shelters and senior centers, libraries and fire stations. It takes Mayor Boyer almost a minute to rattle off the list of projects in his small town alone.

Humiston says this change, coupled with a budget proposal from the President Trump that would deeply slash funding for the USDA, is surprising to some, given the fact that many rural areas voted for the president.

"As far as I can tell, the people that did vote for President Trump from rural areas are definitely getting the short end of the stick on this budget," Humiston says.

Farmersville went for Hillary Clinton in last November's election but Tulare County as a whole was strongly in President Trump's camp.

Valley Public Radio reached out repeatedly to the USDA for comment, but officials in both Washington D.C. and at the state level declined our requests for an interview. However in a written statement, the agency said the elimination of the undersecretary position is offset by the creation of a new assistant to the secretary position that will supervise rural development activities. They claim this will actually reduce bureaucracy and increase the influence of rural communities by giving them more access to the agency head.

"Focusing on whether or not there is an undersecretary is also worrying about nomenclature. Simply calling someone an undersecretary does not elevate the mission area; attaching it directly to the secretary does," the statement read.

Other advocates for rural communities are not comforted by this argument and have sounded the alarm as well.

Anna Johnson with the Center for Rural Affairs says having the position be 'assistant to the secretary' means it is not approved by the Senate and therefore less accountable to the Congress for the huge lending portfolio it oversees.

"The undersecretaries have dedicated officials and staff. And removing that institutional support for managing this \$216 billion portfolio gives us concern," Johnson says.

Farmersville Mayor Boyer says he too is very nervous about the changes and signals from the administration, wondering what it means for his town and others like it.

"There are more projects that we want to do in our community and I know there are a lot of other communities around the valley and the nation that want to be able to improve their rural areas. And without USDA Rural Development to be able to help with these projects I don't know who would be," Boyer says.

The institutional reorganization has happened, but Congress ultimately has the say on how much is spent in each department.

An early draft out of the House of Representative still seeks to reduce the USDA budget by just over \$1 billion or about 5% of its budget.

That is still a significant cut but far less than the \$4.8 billion cut recommended by President Trump.