

THE FOOTHILLS SUN-GAZETTE

Farmersville seeks \$4M for new fire station, closer to bidding on \$18M waste water plant

December 13, 2017

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Farmersville – One of Tulare County's smallest cities may not have a city manager, but that hasn't stopped them from moving forward on two projects more than 10 years in the making.

At its Nov. 27 meeting, the Farmersville City Council applied for a \$5 million grant as part of the 2017 Community Development Block Grant (CDBG). Issued through the California Department of Housing and Community Development, the grants can be used to provide homeownership assistance and rehabilitation, public service programs, planning studies, economic development assistance and public facility projects. The item was presented by Karen Saucedo of Self-Help Enterprises, which handles housing and other economic development activities for the city, who urged the Council to apply for the maximum \$5 million.

More than \$4 million of the grant is being requested to build a new fire station and a purchase a new fire truck. Farmersville has needed a new fire station since 1995. A plan for a new fire station was completed in 1997, and identified the property on Front Street just west of Farmersville Boulevard along the railroads tracks as a possible location for a new fire station. The city purchased the property in 2008.

Farmersville's old fire station on Ash Street was built in the 1940s and is in bad shape. Even the smallest engines can barely clear the bay doors. Up until this month, Farmersville's Fire Department shared space with the Tulare County Fire Department headquarters at the City of Farmersville's civic center complex on Visalia Road. The grant would also provide \$465,116 for housing rehabilitation and home owner assistance and \$348,837 for general administration.

The resolution passed 2-0 with votes being cast by council members Greg Gomez and Rosa Vasquez. Mayor Paul Boyer, an employee of Self-Help Enterprises, abstained from the vote due to a possible conflict of interest and council members Matt Sisk and Leonel Benevides were absent. The City Council can pass a resolution without three votes as long as there are three council members present, the quorum needed to hold a public meeting. Abstentions are not counted against the motion, giving the vote a 2-0 majority.

The council also took steps to begin its biggest construction project ever by prequalifying bidders on a new \$18 million wastewater treatment plant project. Nine contractors were pre-qualified and will be asked to submit bids for the project.

"We are working hard to get this project going. There have been a lot of delays," said Interim City Manager and Police Chief Mario Krstic. "We want to go out to bid in January and break ground in May and then have a big push to the finish."

The new wastewater facility will be funded through \$5 million, 2% interest loan from the USDA that will be paid back over 40 years through a rate increase approved by the council in 2013. Last month, the final step of the five-year rate ratcheting ended when residents began paying \$56.61 per month for sewer, up from \$23.75 in 2013. The USDA loan will be combined with about \$13 million in grants from the State Water Resources Control Board's (Water Board) State Revolving Fund to construct the plant. The City has already spent \$1 million in design and permits which will be reimbursed by the State.

QK Inc. in Visalia, which acts as Farmersville's city engineer, first identified the need to upgrade the WWTP more than a decade ago. The 50-year-old facility has not been expanded since 1978. When municipal sewer systems pass the 70% threshold for capacity the State Water Board mandates that the City begin plans to expand their WWTP. Farmersville officially received word from the Water Board that it had to begin plans for a new WWTP in 2014. The current WWTP can process about 1.25 million gallons of waste water per day and is already processing about 850,000 gallons per day.

Not having available capacity also means city's cannot issue "will serve" letters to developers, a required document for them to build. That could lead to the State issuing a ban on new development, which would further hamper the impoverished city's ability to pay for its own needed improvements like sewer and water.