



To the Citizens of the City of Valdosta,

March 25, 2013

The Valdosta Mayor and City Council are committed to providing quality municipal services that meet the expectations of our citizens. In addition to providing fire and police protection and other beneficial quality of life services, the city leadership is equally committed to providing adequate water and wastewater treatment services to its citizens, maintaining a functioning sewer collection system and discharging treated water in an environmentally responsible manner. Recently, citizens have been inundated with information about the current state of the city's wastewater treatment plant and sewer collection system, as well as the decisions made during the recent flood event. The following information is provided to explain the recent event and to help citizens better understand these important issues and the dedicated work of their elected officials and municipal staff.

THE SITUATION

The city operates two wastewater treatment plants, the Withlacoochee Plant and the Mud Creek Plant. Both plants have large wastewater treatment capacities and perform several stages of treatment to remove over 98% of the pollutants in the wastewater before it is discharged into local waterways. During heavy rainfall events, the volume of stormwater increases and can cause inflow and infiltration (I&I) problems with the sewer collection system—which has been a major contributor to sewer spills.

The Withlacoochee Plant—which was not in a flood zone when originally built—was severely flooded and damaged in the 2009 flood event. The assessed level of damage to the Withlacoochee Plant was actually a key factor in obtaining the federal disaster declaration by the President, a declaration that provided federal assistance to the city as well as all flood victims. The city immediately sought FEMA's assistance and applied for funding for improvements to the collection system and for the relocation of the plant. While the city awaited FEMA's approval for funding, any major improvements to the plant or alternate sources of revenue sought would jeopardize possible FEMA funding. In anticipation of FEMA's funding, the city proactively acquired 75 acres of land to relocate the plant to property outside the 500-year flood plain and at an elevation approximately 60 feet higher than the existing plant site. After nearly three years of navigating FEMA's claims and appeal process, the city was denied funding on August 1, 2012 for the relocation of the plant and construction of a new force main project, which would have significantly eliminated most sewer overflows.

On August 9, 2012, immediately following the final FEMA denial for funding to relocate the Withlacoochee Plant, the Mayor and City Council approved a contract for the design of the Withlacoochee Plant pump stations, force main, equalization basin and plant headworks, as well as a find-and-fix program for leaking sewers—all of which will resolve the issue of sewer overflows in the low lying areas along Sugar Creek and the first portions of the new treatment plant. Later in 2012, the city applied for a GEFA loan for \$32 million. This project will be bid in June of this year, and completion is anticipated in August 2014. The city will also issue the Design/Build RFP for the relocation of the Withlacoochee Plant within the next few months, which is expected to cost \$20 million and be completed by August 2015.

CAPITAL INVESTMENT IN WATER AND WASTEWATER SYSTEMS

Over the last two decades, the city has invested nearly \$168 million in capital improvement projects for its water and wastewater systems to meet the needs of a growing city. The water plant on Guest Road cost over \$20 million to build in 1992 and was expanded in 2007 at a cost of nearly \$20 million to meet the water consumption needs of the city and its residential, commercial, business and industrial customers. The Mud Creek Wastewater Treatment Plant expansion—doubling its capacity—was completed last year at a cost of nearly \$40 million. Since 2009, the city has spent approximately \$7 million on wastewater system improvements alone, including upgrading major lift stations, inspecting and repairing over 75 miles of sewer lines and more. The upcoming investment of \$52 million for the Withlacoochee Plant and the Force Main project will increase the city's investment to approximately \$220 million in capital projects for its water and wastewater systems in the past 22 years—an average of \$10 million a year.

REGIONAL FLOODING

The City of Valdosta is located in the lower portion of the Withlacoochee River and Little River basins, which drains approximately a 1,500 square mile area in South Georgia. Over the years, city officials have encouraged key stakeholders to help outline efforts needed to protect our communities from future flooding risks at the local, regional, and state levels. While the necessary repairs and relocation of the plant will remedy the sewer overflows in the collection system, it will not alleviate the continued flooding risks of the plant and the Sugar Creek neighborhoods that occur during regional heavy rain events. Since approximately 99% of the stormwater comes from other communities as far north as Crisp County, the solution will require a regional approach and upstream retention.

Following the 2009 flood event, Valdosta officials initiated meetings with various stakeholders to request assistance with the flooding solution. The city has again contacted the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), who has agreed to such a meeting and will be bringing all the appropriate agencies—such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the Georgia Emergency Management Agency, U.S. Geological Survey, and other jurisdictional agencies—to Valdosta next month to discuss the issue, seek solutions, and develop a regional plan.

LESSONS LEARNED

Several lessons were learned in the 2009 flood event which assisted in the decision-making process in the February 2013 flood event:

- In 2009, a temporary berm was constructed over multiple days as an emergency measure to protect the pump station; however, the berm did not prevent flooding of the chemical building, the chlorine contact building, the filters and the belt presses. The plant's electrical and control systems for these buildings and structures were destroyed in the flood waters and rendered inoperable. In 2013, the electric system, chlorine cylinders, de-chlorination system and all flooded areas were turned off to avoid the damage that was experienced in 2009. This decision was also made to avoid any potential drowning, electrocution and other safety concerns for staff members who were working at the flooded plant.
- In 2009, the natural occurring bacteria used in the treatment process were washed out of the plant as a result of the continuous pumping during the event. In 2013, the bacteria were saved so that the system could treat wastewater immediately when it was returned to operation.
- In 2009, the plant had a complete loss of function for nine days and was not fully operational for over a month. In 2013, the plant lost function for three days then was fully operational.
- After the 2009 event, the city installed bypass pumps, pipes and valves to utilize in the event of another emergency or act of nature.

SAFETY OF WATER IN LOCAL RIVERS

In a presentation made by Utilities Director Henry Hicks at the March 7 City Council meeting, the results of upstream and downstream river water testing showed that within three days of the plant being fully operational, downstream sampling of local streams and rivers impacted by sewer overflows all met EPD environmental levels and deemed safe for citizens. Furthermore, the Suwannee Democrat (which covers communities in Florida, south of Valdosta) reported on March 10 that "*The Florida Department of Environmental Protection sampled the Withlacoochee River after the failure last month of a wastewater treatment plant in Valdosta. The plant returned to normal operation on March 3. The result of the sampling showed that bacteria levels were well below the established water quality standard. Based on these results, little to no environmental impact is anticipated, and the FDEP does not plan to conduct further testing at this time.*" The Utilities Director's full presentation to the council is available on the home page of the city's website.

SPLOST VII and GEFA FUNDING SOURCES

In November 2013, a SPLOST referendum will be held and voters will be asked to approve \$55.4 million in dedicated funding for the plant relocation, force main project, and inspection of the remainder of the collection system. Additional work in the sewer collection system will also be needed, including the staff's inspection of 300 miles of underground city sewer lines, using cameras and other testing methods, to identify and eliminate sources of infiltration by lining or replacing the existing pipes. The GEFA loan will be used to accelerate the projects—otherwise the city would have to wait until all SPLOST funds are collected, which will not be until 2019. By using SPLOST VII proceeds for both construction and debt retirement, the city can have both projects completed and online by December 2015—making the sewer system improvements the highest priority.

MOVING FORWARD

City officials have worked diligently to protect the interests of Valdosta citizens and are prepared to move forward with the Withlacoochee Plant relocation, improvements to the sewer collection system and to address and prevent future flood events in our region and state. Through perseverance and steady implementation of these plans, Valdosta will be well-prepared to meet our needs for the next 30 years. For more information, citizens are encouraged to stay connected through the city's website at www.valdostacity.com and by watching Metro Valdosta 17, the government access channel on Mediacom.

Sincerely,

Mayor John Gayle
Councilman Ben Norton
Councilman James Wright
Councilwoman Deidra White

Councilman Joseph "Sonny" Vickers
Councilman Alvin Payton, Jr.
Councilman Tim Carroll
Councilman Robert Yost