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# Costly Water Filter Plant Sees More Use After Being Offline

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The City of Norwich surface water treatment plant under construction in October 2017. (Photo from the Delaware Engineering website)

NORWICH – After being offline for the majority of 2023, the City of Norwich’s water filter treatment plant has been operating more consistently on an as-needed basis, according to Department of Public Works Superintendent Edward Pepe.

The water filter plant faced setbacks since it was built in 2018, primarily due to aluminum exceedances in the filter’s backwash. The New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC) monitors aluminum levels to limit the impact of the plant on the environment.

“The NYSDEC monitors the wastewater, or we have to do a monthly report,” Pepe said.

The \$6 million plant was built after the previous 119-year-old water treatment plant was said to be “unsafe” by the New York State Department of Health. Pepe said this was because there was a “direct connection between the raw water and the finished water, which is not ideal,” and “the plant had exceeded its useful life.”

City of Norwich Mayor Brian Doliver said, like the old plant, the new plant was always intended to provide a backup for the city's well water. The city has four wells, but only Well Three and Well Four are used.

Pepe said that the city intends to operate such that 80 percent of the drinking water comes from wells and 20 percent from drinking water. Situations that warrant using the water plant include the wells' motor dying or a power failure. The plant was not used during the City of Norwich's boil water notice in June because "it would not have affected the situation in any way," Pepe said.

"It's a backup system, so it's always good to have backup systems. If something happens to your well water supply, you could use that," Pepe said. "If one of the wells goes down, we would want to have the filter plant on as backup. The filter plant can't produce as much water as the wells."

Doliver said the plant "could be used more often" than it has since its manufacturing. Pepe said the plant has been used more this year than last, particularly during the winter months.

"It's been online since 2018, off and on. It's a backup supply, so if we need to put it online, we will," Pepe said. "We usually don't run it in the summer, usually more in the winter. So we used it all winter. The last time we used it was in the middle of May, and it's been offline since then."

The plant has faced issues due to aluminum exceedances in the filter backwash. According to Pepe, the aluminum in the backwash does not affect the plant's finished or purified drinking water.

Because of the aluminum exceedances, the NYSDEC was concerned that the aluminum would impact the Rainsford Creek drainage area. Last year, the city sampled the water in Rainsford Creek to prove the lack of environmental impact, and they are now waiting on results from the NYSDEC, Pepe said.

According to the City of Norwich Water Commission meeting minutes from February 2021, when the plant was originally built, no feature was included to reduce the aluminum because an aluminum permit was never formally discussed during the filter's design phase.

Pepe said the city began working on a permit modification process with the NYSDEC in 2021. According to the City of Norwich Water Commission meeting minutes from March

this year, Pepe stated the city submitted an official request for modification on February 9. Doliver said the permit has yet to be approved.

Doliver said the city has not receive fines from the NYSDEC for running the plant without the modified permit. Pepe said the plan is "fully functional," even without the NYSDEC's approved modification.

"So we can run [the plant] functionally, but the more we run it, the more in violation we tend to be," Pepe said.

Doliver said the idea of the filter plant came to fruition before the current leadership took over. According to water commission meeting minutes, conceptual design for the project began in 2007. In December 2012, the Common Council approved moving forward with the "Water Filtration Project." Doliver took office in January 2021, and Pepe has been the head of DPW since August 2018.

Those who use the drinking water provided by the City of Norwich are charged a fee for their water, which has helped the city pay off the loan, Doliver said. The city's most recent Annual Water Quality Report in 2023 showed that the minimum water bill charger per household per quarter was about \$68, roughly a dollar increase from 2022. The minimum water bill charge had not increased in eight years.

Doliver said that this rise in cost is not necessarily due to paying off the water plant's debt. He said the lack of increase in the water bill "maybe went on for too long" and that an increase was necessary to provide water to the city.

If you have further questions, call City of Norwich Department of Public Works Superintendent Edward Pepe at (607) 334-1255.