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New Clark County partnership hopes to keep down sewer connection fees and capital improvement costs

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The Salmon Creek Wastewater Treatment Plant processes 15 million gallons of sewage every day. Three years ago, it underwent a incremental upgrade that cost \$70 million.

Every day, underneath the surface of Clark County, enough sewage to fill almost 60 Olympic-size pools surges through a complex network of pipes to treatment plants throughout the county. In the next 50 years, that volume is expected to nearly triple.

In an effort to reduce capital improvement costs for water treatment infrastructure and the associated spikes in ratepayer fees, and to spur business development in anticipation of growth, Battle Ground, Ridgefield, Clark County and the **Clark Regional Wastewater District** have formed the **Discovery Clean Water Alliance**.

A regional governing body eight years in the making, the alliance will jointly administer its members' sewer infrastructure starting in early

2013. Representatives from the alliance hope that as they pool their resources, they can overcome costly sewer connection fees and sewer capital improvement costs, which are also major hurdles to development.

The "Discovery Corridor" -- an area along Interstate 5 between La Center and north Vancouver -- has been touted as the next Silicon Valley for more than a decade. Yet much of the cluster of 20-acre and larger parcels remains undeveloped.

"Two of the largest costs for new development are sewer connection fees and transportation impact fees," says Clark County Public Works Director Pete Capell. "By pooling our resources together ... we can cover a lot of the infrastructure costs of development at lower prices so that we don't have to charge quite as much to connect."

The first capital improvement project the alliance is working on is the Discovery Corridor Wastewater Transmission System, eight miles of pipe and two pump stations that will run through and connect the Discovery Corridor to the surrounding area's sewer infrastructure.

The project is expected to cost \$25 million, \$5 million of which will be funded by alliance members' capital program funds in proportion to the amount of sewage each is expected to convey through the improvements. The project is expected to be online by 2016.

Two \$10 million low-interest state loans were awarded to the project in part because of its regional scope.

"Size is very important," says John Peterson, general manager of the Clark Regional Wastewater District. "If someone is lending money to an alliance that is serving 100,000 and has a strong framework, it gets you a better bond rating than, say, the city of Ridgefield with a population of 5,000."

Completion of the Discovery Corridor Wastewater Transmission System will also mean, among other things, that Ridgefield won't have to expand its wastewater treatment plant even if its population grows, said Ridgefield public works director Steve Wall. That's because it will get a connection to the county's Salmon Creek Wastewater Treatment Plant.

"Ultimately, that connection to the regionalized facility will help us stabilize rates," Wall says. "It's putting everybody's thoughts and power together and gaining those efficiencies."

- **Peter Beland**

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