

Kolb offers ideas on drainage

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It didn't have to rain more than 2 inches in 40 minutes last month for Augusta's Department of Public Works to realize the city has a drainage problem. Complaint records logged through the department's maintenance office show that the number of drainage-related calls during the first eight months of 2003 is more than double the calls logged in all of 2001.

The complaints will only continue, City Administrator George Kolb told an Augusta Commission committee Monday, unless elected officials find alternative sources of revenue to pay for drainage improvements countywide.

"This is where we get the money from, and it's starting to dwindle," Mr. Kolb said, referring to sales tax collections shortly before Monday's engineering services committee meeting.

In 2001, a drought year that saw water restrictions imposed on residents, public works logged 201 drainage complaints plus an additional 270 storm sewer problems. In 2003, a year of near-record rainfall, complaints have flooded in.

As of Aug. 6, the number of drainage calls recorded was more than twice the figure for all of 2001, reaching 576 complaints in eight months. An additional 206 storm sewer-related calls were received during the same period.

Although public works projects, including those related to drainage, worth millions of dollars, are in line to receive sales tax funding, many of those projects either have escalated in price or have been underbudgeted, Mr. Kolb told the commission.

It adds up to a deficit of more than \$14.3 million for 25 sales tax projects, including a \$1 million shortfall to fix flooding along Rae's Creek at Willow Creek subdivision and a \$534,562 shortfall for drainage improvement work planned for East Boundary Street.

Mr. Kolb recommended several revenue-raising options that the commission could consider to fund those existing projects and future ones in an effort to fix flooding problems that plague parts of the city.

All of those options involve a tax increase, however, making none of them particularly popular with elected officials.

The ideas Mr. Kolb suggested to the commission included:

- Creating a special tax district for flood-prone areas and using property tax

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collections from those areas to pay off revenue bonds.

- Taking out a general obligation bond to pay for drainage work and raising property taxes to pay off that bond.
- Charging developers "impact" fees and using the money to pay for improvements.
- Instituting a stormwater utility fee to pay for drainage-related work - his most highly recommended option.

An additional \$3.1 million is available in unspent, unallocated sales tax funds, but with 25 sales tax projects waiting to be fully funded, which projects and which districts will get that money are expected to create some controversy.

"If we get into this issue, it's going to be a cat fight," said engineering services Chairman Andy Cheek.

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