RCAP Support, Perserverance Pays Off For Morrison, Missouri, Water Project

By Jeff Kormann, Technical Assistance Provider, Midwest Assistance Program

In many ways the city of Morrison, Missouri, is similar to many small towns the Midwest Assistance Program, Inc. (MAP), the Midwest RCAP, assists. At some point in the 1930s, the city took advantage of the opportunity to obtain surplus piping from the 1904 St. Louis World’s Fair to develop a centralized water distribution system. A 48,000-gallon storage reservoir was then constructed. Later improvements included a new well in 1957 and a significant upgrade in the early 1990s, which included new distribution lines and a 35,000-gallon standpipe.
Fast forward to 2011, and a time when the wheels seemed to be coming off the wagon for Morrison’s drinking water system. The storage reservoir was showing its age and triggering sampling violations by allowing rainwater to flow directly into the distribution system. The reservoir was only one of a number of substandard system components, including the adjacent well house and an improperly abandoned well. This prompted the Missouri Department of Natural Resources (MO DNR) to issue an Administrative Order of Consent (AOC) and establish a schedule for addressing several items of deficiency. To help the community address these challenges, MO DNR funded a preliminary engineering report that carried what the Board of Aldermen felt was an excessively steep price tag. The city chose the route of addressing the action items in the AOC one by one as local resources permitted, a strategy that eventually triggered the imposition of a fine, which was paid in accordance with MO DNR requirements.

Eventually, the town whittled the list down to the most costly and contentious item: DNR’s requirement to renovate, replace, or retire the more than 80-year-old reservoir. Finding no stand-alone grant funding, and with the scope of work considered too small for either USDA-Rural Development or the State Drinking Water Revolving Loan programs, the Board found itself in a position of having to “pick its poison” from among several unappealing options. One of the options included mortgaging their handsome city park, to avoid additional financial penalties or other legal actions being taken by the primacy agency.

Enter Midwest Assistance Program (MAP), and the resources of the Rural Community Assistance Partnership (RCAP) Network into the equation. Based on information from an area contractor to re-line the tank and replace the current lid with a concrete cover, MAP Technical Assistance Provider (TAP) Jeff Kormann was able to submit a successful application to Communities Unlimited (CU), the Southern RCAP, for a $95,000 low-interest loan leveraged by slightly over $16,000 in available local cash. CU is a Community development financial institution (CDFI) and can provide lending to small communities. MAP then produced a rate study which projected the city would need to increase water rates by nearly 30 percent in order to make monthly payments against the 15-year term and accumulate some cash reserve for short-lived asset replacement. The Board agreed that this increase, while no doubt painful for the many local customers who were elderly or on fixed income. One RCAP region partnered with another to ensure this community could receive low-interest loan funding that proved integral to this community ultimately having safe drinking water.
incomes, was still significantly less than what would have likely been required by public funders.

In 2016, the town signed contracts with the general contractor and a local firm for final engineering design and construction inspection services. When delays did occur, Kormann drafted a letter for the city to submit to MO DNR through which they were granted a time extension for completion of the work.

In spring 2018, just before the end of the extension period, the municipal elections produced a surprise. Mayor Sam Birk, who had served in that capacity for 40 of the previous 42 years, declined to retain office based on write-in votes, leaving the city without a mayor for nearly six months. Along with that, the city clerk stepped down, citing job responsibilities, and turnover on the Board deprived the project of its major advocates. The contractor, citing prior scheduling commitments, did not begin work when expected and the entire construction season was lost. At this point the project appeared to be in serious jeopardy, and MO DNR’s patience was put to the test.

This is where perseverance came in. Although not authorized to speak directly for the city with MO DNR Enforcement, Kormann remained in contact with their staff while the utility board president was able to obtain another extension to June 2019 without additional fines. Just as the contractor was preparing to mobilize in November 2018, early wintry weather intervened, and the project was once again delayed.

As spring arrived, the contractor began pouring concrete to create a new liner and roof for the reservoir. Additional work, including replacement of the dilapidated wellhouse, contributed to a cost overrun, but by late June 2019, the work was substantially completed. Once final cleanup and punch-list items were completed, MO DNR and the city were able to formally close the books on this very interesting and challenging project.

Today the 139 citizens of Morrison – that unique little community located in both the hills and valleys of Central Missouri – enjoy the benefits of the world’s most important resource: safe drinking water.