

County appoints Paradise sewer board members

By [Ed Moreth](#)

Community project receives additional \$1.4 million in funding October 21, 2021

The Sanders County Sewer District at Paradise is back in action with three new board members and with a big bundle of new money from the state.

The county commissioners recently selected three people to replace those who were ousted or resigned, which now gives the sewer board enough for a legal quorum. Don Stamm replaced Sunny Chase. Dewey Arnold was appointed to fill Gary Kelly's position and Janie McFadgen will take Rick McCollum's spot.

And last week, the county received word from Governor Greg Gianforte that an American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) grant for \$1,437,881 for the Paradise Wastewater System Improvements Project was approved. "It's incredible, it's awesome," said Commissioner Carol Brooker. "The people of Paradise are so lucky to pull in this money for the project. This is a sweet package," added Brooker, who also said she was surprised the community received the grant because of all the internal local strife over the project.

The sewer board had been at a stand still for several weeks after two members were recalled and another resigned, leaving only board members Terry Caldwell and Janice Barber, not enough for a quorum, which meant they couldn't move forward with the project at all. Paradise resident Cody Lampman had petitioned the county for the recall on Chase and McCollum in February. Lampman was one of four who applied for the appointment

vacancies. The two were recalled in late August by a slim margin. The board was reduced to two when Gary Kelly resigned in late August.

Brooker said selecting board members was a tough decision because all four applicants were good people and would do a good job. Brooker, along with Commissioners Tony Cox and Glen Magera, spent about 45 minutes interviewing each candidate. Prior to the interview, they made sure there were no conflicts of interest. Brooker said they were mainly looking for candidates who wanted to serve the community. She said they didn't ask if they were for or against the project. She said that even though Lampman wasn't selected, he could re-apply if a board member resigns or when someone's term of office expires. The terms of Stamm and Arnold ends in 2024 and McFadgen ends next year. The board will elect its own president, the office held by Chase. Brooker said that Katy French of Paradise requested that a special election for the board members be held instead of the commissioners appointing them. The commissioner said it would have cost Paradise residents \$4,500 for an election, so the commissioners turned down her request.

Brooker said the board could start meeting and working on the project immediately. It had been meeting on the second Friday of the month, but no meeting had been scheduled as of this week.

"Montana is leading the nation in making critical water and sewer infrastructure investments, with more than 80 percent of them supporting our rural communities," said Gianforte in the letter announcing the grant approval. "Projects such as this help address the critical water and sewer infrastructure needs of our local communities, allowing them to prepare for long-term growth and take action to address immediate community needs," he added.

Aside from the Paradise grant, Sanders County will be receiving \$3.5-million in grants for sewer projects, but since Paradise is getting over a million dollars, that money will go to other projects, according to Brooker. There has been strong opposition to the Paradise project, but the biggest dispute is the \$750,000 rural development loan, which means property owners would have to pay \$185 a year in additional taxes for 40 years to repay the loan. Brooker believes that with the amount Paradise is getting from ARPA, it's likely the loan could be reduced, though not eliminated.

"This is great news if we can only keep Great West Engineering from eating it up in engineering fees," said Caldwell, who joined the board last October. He said the engineering firm has already spent almost a half a million dollars on a system that cannot be approved because the Burlington Northern Santa Fe railroad refused to approve an easement for the sewer mixing field, something he believes Great West Engineering should have known prior to spending so much money on a design that wouldn't work without the easement. The Paradise board had negotiated a deal with Bridger Bischoff for property for the sewer project, but without the planned easement, the board will have to re-negotiate for other Bischoff property that won't require a railroad easement.

"In my opinion, they should have retained the proper easements before they put a half a million dollars in engineering before they knew if the position of the drain field they chose was going to work," said Caldwell. Brooker said Great West would have to redesign the system, which will be an added cost. In addition, costs have risen due to Covid and it's possible that it will cost more for a different site.

Brooker hopes that bids for the project will go out soon and that work on it will start next summer. Caldwell looks forward to once

again working on the project. "There is strong opposition in this town, but my goal is to unite them," said Caldwell. "We're there to represent the people, not ourselves."