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Longview's tapwater residue is here to stay



Bill Wagner/TDN file

Pancake House owner Dana Millard shows markings on a syrup pitcher, left, she says were caused by Longview's new water system in July. At right is a new pitcher that hadn't been exposed to the water.

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Engineers have determined that a naturally occurring mineral in Longview's water — not hardness — is the cause of white spots left behind on residents' dishes, appliances and vehicles after the water evaporates.

The bad news: Eliminating the mineral, silica, would require installing a complex, expensive treatment system that would cost between \$35 million and \$81 million.

The bottom line: Water customers are going to have to learn to live with the silica residue.

Longview City Council members, saying they have been barraged with complaints from citizens about the spotting, were dismayed at the news city staff conveyed at Thursday's workshop.

"I hate the white spotting," Mayor Don Jensen said. "It's not going to go away. I'm not happy, but that's not doing me any good. ... If staff and the consultants stay it's a waste of money, why go forward with it?"

Councilman Tom Hutchinson agreed, saying, "It doesn't seem the juice is worth the squeeze."

The water's quality, hardness and nuisance white spots have generated complaints from Longview water customers since the city switched its water supply from the Cowlitz River to groundwater wells at the Mint Farm Industrial Park in January 2013.

The city tackled the water quality problems this winter by replacing the 90-year-old water mains in the Baltimore Street area that had been shedding iron and manganese into the water. Some residents in that neighborhood had discolored water with a bad smell and metallic taste. Now they're dealing with the effects of fluctuating chlorine levels, which the city is trying to fix at the water treatment plant.

The spotting is a separate issue. For months, engineers have been testing different methods of softening the water and reducing the spotting. They discovered that hardness wasn't causing the spotting — in fact, cities with much harder water than Longview's have much less spotting, consultants said. (Hardness is caused by minerals such as calcium and magnesium deposits.)

Softening treatments tested had almost no effect on the spotting, "which isn't surprising because the water's not that hard," consultant Melinda Friedman of Confluence Engineering Group, LLC, told the council Thursday.

"If you had gone in and put in a softening plant, you probably wouldn't have observed any benefit," she said.

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Longview City Council narrowly approved a more than \$200,000

Tests showed that removing more than 50 percent of the silica from the water resulted in visible improvement in the spotting. However, the process requires extremely complex technology that would involve replacing the Mint Farm's production wells, raising and lowering the water's pH levels, adding chemicals and removing the resulting sludge.

The minimum \$35 million cost of such processes would exceed the expense of constructing the \$33 million Mint Farm Water Treatment Plant — and doesn't factor in the high price of operating and managing the system. Also, there would be a large quantity of solids to dispose of, Public Works Director Jeff Cameron said.

"I think we should at least try some more testing, but I don't see a solution that will take us back to where we were in the Cowlitz River," he said after the workshop.

Consultants will estimate the cost of further tests that could reduce the spotting and present them to the council to see if they want to proceed, he said.

The Mint Farm's groundwater is about three times harder than the Cowlitz River water, which rates 27 on a hardness scale that measures naturally occurring calcium and magnesium minerals. Mint Farm groundwater scores a 91. Water rated 0-60 is soft, moderate water is 61-120, hard water is 121-180 and very hard water is anything higher than 181.

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