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# Permit for \$14 million springs center gets initial City Council approval

By Greg Bowen | The Herald-Zeitung | Apr 27, 2015

New Braunfels City Council gave initial approval Monday to a permit for a New Braunfels Utilities project that would revamp an old warehouse and parking lot into a \$14 million environmental center that would protect Comal Springs and teach citizens about water management and conservation.

“We’re really excited about this project,” said NBU CEO Paula DiFonzo.

NBU is proposing to revamp its old warehouse and fleet parking lot facility on Klingemann Street to create the new Comal Springs Conservation Center. The site, opened in 1940 but essentially abandoned by NBU a decade or so ago after multiple floods, contains the headwaters of the Comal Springs, the original water source for the community.

DiFonzo said NBU would remove 85 percent of the runoff-producing impervious asphalt and concrete now covering the site and return those areas to “native plants and the way it was” to help safeguard the springs.

Existing buildings on the site would be remodeled to provide a multi-use conference center, event space, and an education center for water resources and habitat located in open-style structures featuring glass, wood and galvanized steel siding and connected by covered walkways. The project would feature such things as a “living building” with a wall of vines; lots of landscaping, including a wetlands and a woodland; and water-reuse projects, including recycling black water and using rainwater to flush toilets.

DiFonzo said the headwaters of Comal Springs would be “uncapped.”

“We found an opening in there. It is unbelievable and we’re excited about being able to show that again,” she said.

She said the center would also feature “a lot of demonstrations ... to show people how to manage water.”

DiFonzo also said preliminary plans are to fund about 50 percent of the \$14 million price tag via grants and donations. The rest would come from NBU’s budget.

Councilman Ron Reaves said the plan was “a beautiful vision” and “very commendable,” but that he was concerned that if NBU removed the concrete and asphalt covering the ground, the result could be the springs being exposed to industrial contaminants from transformers and other electrical equipment that might have seeped into the soil over the years.

DiFonzo said NBU has already had environmental studies conducted at the site, which has been given “a clean bill of health.” Additional environmental testing would be conducted, she said.

Reaves also said he didn’t think the project should be funded by NBU rates. Councilwoman Aja Edwards asked if the springs center would take a rate hike to fund. DiFonzo answered that a rate hike hasn’t been anticipated.

DiFonzo noted that while NBU is seeking a city permit for the project, it isn’t ready to move forward on it “in full bore.” The municipal utility is in the process of developing a long-range budget that includes lots of contemplated projects, including not only the springs center but an aquifer storage and recovery facility, needed improvements to water and wastewater systems, a proposed reuse system to water city parks, and more. In late summer or early fall, she said NBU will be able to report to council on which projects it’ll be planning to go forward with.

Tim Barker and Bob Wolf, two supporters of the proposed reuse water system for city parks, said the reuse project should be given priority over the springs center.

Wayne Rudolph asked why NBU asked for and received incremental rate increases from residents when it appears they have \$7 million to throw at the springs center.

“It’s a wonderful idea, but it looks like somebody has got a champagne taste on a beer budget,” Rudolph said.

Mayor Barron Casteel said the action now being taken by council doesn't approve the \$14 million springs center, but only a permit for the site plan that NBU would follow should it be decided to go forward with the center.

Casteel also said the site would be "more sensitive to the headwaters of the Comal." Moreover, NBU needs to fix the site by returning its concrete and asphalt to impervious cover, "so that when we do have rainfall and floods, we don't continue to jeopardize the headwaters of the Comal."

Casteel, who serves on the NBU board, said he believes that protecting the headwaters of the Comal was the main goal of those who have played a part in planning the springs center.

"The Comal Springs are such a vital asset to our community," Casteel said.

Council will have to approve a second reading of the permit request before the project would be able to go forward. After several complained that the project proposal seemed to come without advance notice, Councilwoman Aja Edwards said that the two-reading process will provide additional time for public input and feedback.