

# **Paso Robles' stinky sulfur water is closer to the drain**

*Sulphur springs exposed in 2003 quake may soon be routed to Salinas riverbed*

**Tonya Strickland, San Luis Obispo Tribune, 8-16-10**

Crews are nearly done with installing a pipe under the city to reroute the hot sulfur water that ruptured through the Paso Robles City Hall parking lot during the 2003 San Simeon Earthquake.

Orange cones and construction crews trenching sections of 10th Street off Riverside Avenue are a visual sign of the latest portion of the construction, which began in June.

Once complete, the 10-inch storm drain will be 2,500 feet long and be equipped to carry the hot water underground from City Hall, beneath Highway 101 and out to the Salinas River a half mile away.

Possible options to harness the hot water for public use, such as re-creating the city's historic bathhouses, were tabled because the Federal Emergency Management Agency will only pay to put the parking lot back to pre-earthquake conditions.

Much of the estimated \$2 million project will be reimbursed by FEMA.

The next step in building the permanent system is constructing an underground vault to catch the sulfur-rich water from its source at City Hall. The open spring still releases up to 140 gallons of hot water per minute.

The water will then be sent through the pipe and into specially created sandy trenches below the surface at the city's water yard to join with the Salinas River's underflow — water that runs underground beneath the riverbed.

When the underground spring erupted in the December 2003 quake, 112-degree water flowed freely into the gutters for a while, leaving the downtown smelling like rotten eggs from the sulphur. Then, the city developed a temporary pumping system that sent the water through pipes to the Salinas River — but the pit remained. The gaping hole is the most visible, and pungent, reminder of the quake damage that's remained in the city.

After the permanent system is complete, the parking lot will be repaved. The entire project is to be completed by late fall.

The permanent system was first approved in December 2008 after various environmental studies. More studies followed. The pit has remained open — fenced and reeking — while officials at various levels decided whether a permanent project could move forward to pump the water back into the ground.

State and federal agencies, including the state's Regional Water Quality Control Board and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, had to review the plans.

## **WHAT'S AHEAD**

Downtown blocks of 10th Street will be closed to motorists for about a week each as workers trench pipe into the street as they head toward the City Hall parking lot, where the sulfur pit has remained since the 2003 San Simeon Earthquake. Then the entire road will be repaved.