

Sinkhole work at Paso Robles City Hall to begin in April

Tonya Strickland, San Luis Obispo Tribune, 2-18-10

The potent odor that often hangs in the air over downtown Paso Robles may soon be no more.

The City Council on Tuesday granted a construction bid to a local company to pave over the 6-year-old gaping pit in the Paso Robles Library/City Hall parking lot and install a permanent system to re-route the hot sulfur water back into the Salinas River.

Work is scheduled to begin in April for completion before the end of the year.

“This is so great,” Mayor Duane Picanco said Wednesday. It helps the city further heal from the 2003 San Simeon Earthquake, he said, which caused the spring to erupt through the ground.

At Tuesday’s meeting, some members of the crowd applauded when the council approved the bid with a 5-0 vote.

A temporary fix on the parking lot has been in place since the 6.6-magnitude quake. The giant hole left behind — and the rotten-egg smell that emanates from it — have been described as one of the last physical reminders of the devastation that rocked San Luis Obispo County on the morning of Dec. 22, 2003.

Two women died trying to escape the then-unreinforced Acorn Building in downtown Paso Robles. The historic mural-covered walls of Mission San Miguel were cracked, and the structure closed. And, in Atascadero, the historic City Hall still stands tall but broken behind chain-link fencing as that city works with the Federal Emergency Management Agency for the millions needed for its repair.

FEMA restrictions

The city received 14 bids, ranging from about \$827,000 to \$1.4 million for the parking lot work.

The least expensive was chosen, which was submitted by MGE Underground Inc., a general engineering contractor based in Paso Robles. FEMA authorized a nearly \$1.3 million reimbursement for the city, but officials can’t use the nearly half million dollars in savings between the bid and FEMA allotment for another project, Public Works Director Doug Monn said, because FEMA will only reimburse for the actual costs of the work.

Also, FEMA will only pay to restore the property back to its prequake status. That means Paso Robles couldn’t entertain alternative ideas to use the sulfur water for other uses, such as tourism, officials have said.

The new system includes catching the water from its source in an underground vault and sending it through pipes to a leach field on city-owned property near the Salinas River. There, the plan is for it to percolate into the soil. It will also cool the water so it won’t harm wildlife or vegetation.

Other fixes from the quake include the \$2.5 million restoration and retrofit of the Carnegie Library in Downtown City Park and the \$15.2 million rebuilding of Flamson Middle School’s main building, which is slated to open this school year.

Elsewhere, Mission San Miguel reopened late last year.