

Easton pursuing \$15 million federal grant to improve sewage systems

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EASTON, Pa. — Easton City Council pushed a pair of resolutions Wednesday that could lead to \$15 million in federal funding for sewer projects, including substantial savings at the wastewater plant.

In an effort to pursue the funds, which come from the Environmental and Climate Justice Block Grant Program, council members approved resolutions confirming a memorandum of understanding between the city and the Easton Area Joint Sewer Authority and solidifying a partnership with the Nurture Nature Center.

The federally backed Environmental and Climate Justice Grants program holds about \$3 billion in funding intended to “empower community efforts to confront and overcome persistent pollution challenges in underserved communities that have often led to worse health and economic outcomes over decades.”

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Easton Director of Public Works Dave Hopkins

As Director of Public Works Dave Hopkins explained, a partnership with a local nonprofit was a prerequisite to apply for the grant funding, and Nurture Nature was selected “because I think they were the right organization for that.”

Hopkins also noted the sewer authority had helped hire an agency to submit for the grant, as “It is a really heavy lift from an administrative point, as far as federal grants go.”

If the grant is received, approximately \$7 million will go toward the construction of a combined heat and power system that can generate electricity by burning methane produced for and from anaerobic digestion at the wastewater plant.

Hopkins said "It will also include a FOG — fats, oils, and grease — receiving facility which helps boost the amount of methane and increases the amount of electricity that we can produce."

This measure could help reduce electrical costs at the wastewater plant by up to 50%, Hopkins said, as they currently do utilize some methane to heat buildings, though a substantial amount is "flared off," "and we're just wasting it," as Hopkins said.

Considering Hopkins pointed out the plant is one of, if not the, biggest energy users in the city, savings from the initiative could be substantial.

Another initiative to separate the city's combined sewers, which amounts to about \$5.2 to \$5.5 million, would help reduce the flow at the plant.

As Hopkins explained, the older sewer lines were installed in the early 1900s, when the use of a single pipe system was more efficient. Separating sewage

and stormwater would help reduce discharge into the Delaware River.

And while the city does have a permit to vent the lines into the river, separating the lines would practically eliminate discharge to the Delaware and prevent the plant from being overwhelmed during heavy rainstorms.

The remainder of the funding would go toward “direct to consumer” prerogatives, including environmental and climate kits “which could include low flow fixtures, maybe LED bulbs” or other items, Hopkins said, as well as money for the Nurture Nature Center.

“It's more of a desired part of the funding source that wants to see some type of direct to consumer [element]. So we've proposed 6,000 kits that we would give out maybe at a table at an event or we would go to food pantries, things like that, to give them away,” Hopkins said.

“And then the fourth and last item is programming by Nurture Nature. They would develop a climate and environmental justice type of educational program around that. They help us in a lot of ways and a lot of different programs. Their staff is pretty good and they've really helped us with our climate action plan.”

Nurture Nature would receive approximately \$1 million over what Hopkins described as a “long rollout” to develop those programs.

All told, Hopkins said pursuing the grant funds, particularly for the combined heat and power system,

would greatly benefit the plant and the city.

"It's not only a giant savings, it's just good for the environment," Hopkins said. "And we're using natural fuel to power it, so there's really no carbon emissions from it."