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Whitsett panel receives funding for storm sewers

By Melissa Gilsan, Herald-Standard
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WHITSETT - Water, water everywhere and all of it a nuisance, but not for long - at least not in this Perry Township community.

"Yes we have a lot of water. The trick is to control it," said Whitsett Community Civic Center Society (WCCCS) secretary Clarence Johnson

Through hard work, the WCCCS has obtained funding in grants and in-kind services to install a \$160,000 storm sewer system in the small riverside town. WCCCS member William Towns is the job coordinator through the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS).

The U.S. Department of Agriculture and the NRCS are supplying in-kind services through engineering and inspection, Towns explained. The WCCCS, through Johnson, is supplying the "legwork" in providing administrative duties, Perry Township has agreed to coordinate with the project to effect repairs to the Pilgrim Rest Road and the Fayette County Redevelopment Authority is acting as the sponsor for the community's \$72,000 grant through the state Department of Environmental Protection's Growing Greener program.

With many communities inundated with rainwater and looking for funding to install storm sewers, the big boost for Whitsett in terms of obtaining funding comes in part from the community's unique history.

One of the first coal patch towns in the area, Whitsett was bordered by the Whitsett and Banning mines and had P&LE (Pittsburgh and Lake Erie) train lines crossing the land.

"But what you may not know is that the lower area of Whitsett was once an island," Towns said.

The railroad and the mines slowly filled in the shelf, linking "Rainbow Island" in the Youghiogheny River with the shore.

In the 1950s, Carnegie Mellon University tested the area and came to the conclusion that it once was a settlement for American Indians. Consequently, the community had to have an archeological study done in 1995 just to construct a pavilion in the area.

Now, with rainwater, underground springs, abandoned mine run-off and the river channel that undercuts a section of the town, a lack of water is not a problem. Instead, the surplus of water has caused a number of on-lot septic systems to fail.

"Instead of going where it should, the waste is being washed to where it shouldn't go," Towns said.

One of the major goals of the project, added Johnson, is to extend the life of the on-lot systems until funding can be found to bring a municipal sewer system to the town.

Right now, the two-phase project focuses on the upper end of Whitsett, and the lower end will be addressed as soon as additional engineering is completed, Towns said. About five years ago, Perry Township and the redevelopment authority worked to try to eliminate the ground water problem in lower Whitsett. However, due to problems with the depth of lines needed to reroute the water, the project fell through.

"The Yough still runs under that part of town, about 15 to 20 feet down," Towns said.

About 60 years ago, a storm sewer system was installed to deal with some of the ground water.

"You can still see some of the headwalls today. The concrete and stone are pretty impressive, but there is no water flowing out," Towns said.

The new plan, Johnson said, is to take the water by pipe to a distilling area near Elwell Creek, where, officials believe, all of the water can be reintroduced to the ground safely. If not, Johnson said, a pipe will take the overflow into the creek.

The first phase of the project will help some 50 residents in 20 homes, a church and the stabilization of Pilgrim Rest Road, Johnson said. The road is being undermined by the groundwater and is nearly impassible.

"That was the original scope of the work, the road and a bit of runoff water. We just pushed and expanded it to include the rest of the community," Johnson said.

Despite the serious nature of the problem, the WCCCS members orchestrated the project not solely out of need but community pride.

"Whitsett has a very unique history. I'm very proud to have a part in it," said Towns.

"We all pick up the ball from time to time," Johnson added. "We're all involved and have had nothing but cooperation so far."