Leaders reject idea of regional water plant

By Scott Elpers

City leaders from Conway Springs and Argonia expressed discontent with the idea of a regional water plant at an informal meeting with other local governments in Conway Springs last week.

A new water treatment plant is needed in the area to combat the high levels of nitrate and arsenic found in the drinking water.

Local governments from Conway Springs, Argonia, Norwich and Sumner County Rural Water District No. 5 have been in talks for the past two years weighing the pros and cons of a regional plant and individual plants to combat the issue.

A regional plant could be constructed with the help of up to $2 million in grants from U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development and the Kansas Department of Health and Environment Public Water Supply Section.

When the local governments met with the federal and state agencies last month, a representative from the USDA said the grant money might not be available if they decide to build individual plants.

“We would prefer to build our own plant for a lot of reasons,” Argonia mayor Alan Brundage said. “We don’t like the idea of having a 10-inch line, 17 miles long. A lot of things could happen to that line.”

“We have a real issue with Harper (County Rural Water District) No. 4 because we could lose them with a regional plant,” he added. “That would make our water very expensive.”

All entities felt they would lose control of their water supply if they also went with a regional plant. They also felt a regional plant didn’t produce any financial advantages, despite nearly $2 million in possible grants.

Conway Springs has had numerous waterline breaks in the past and low-pressure issues. A cheaper water plant would give Conway Springs more funds to fix those issues.

“We’ll pay about the same as a regional plant, but we’ll have a heck of a lot of capital improvement along the way,” Conway Springs mayor Brandy Berntsen said. “We need that because we can’t wait until we pay off the plant to (fix those issues).”

Norwich also expressed an interest in its own plant. Rural Water No. 5 made the decision to build its own plant last month, which will be funded with a USDA loan, said Brian Spano with Wilson & Company.

Wilson & Company is consulting engineering firm that has worked with the local governments through the two-year process.

“They could finance their own plant for a very similar cost of what a regional plant would be,” Spano said. “They wanted to work off of a very fast time line. They want to do something now and they had the funds to do so. They felt it was in their best interest too.”

Despite going toward separate water plants, the local governments will join together to write a letter declining the funding agencies’ offer for grant assistance with a regional plant. The local governments will still pursue loan options from the two funding agencies.

Wilson & Company will help with the letter, and Vince Wetta, Kansas Representative of the 80th District in Sumner and Harper counties, also agreed to right a letter of support for the decision to the funding agencies.

Spano set a response date to the funding agencies for Nov. 11. From there, the local governments will search for funding and be in the initial stages of design for their projects in 2013, Spano said.