

# County chips in for sewer project for Eldorado Springs

Final costs exceeded estimates, causing friction

By Laura Snider  
Camera Staff Writer

A long-running dispute between the Boulder County commissioners and Eldorado Springs was put to rest Tuesday when the commissioners agreed to contribute nearly \$277,000 to help pay for the community's new sewer system and associated upgrades to the area's electric grid.

In 2004, Eldorado Springs residents voted to borrow \$1.8 million to construct a wastewater treatment plant. But over the following years, it became clear that it would cost more than that to build. The total bill for the sewer system — which residents have now been hooked up to for about a year — is \$2.6 million, and the county and the property owners have spent years arguing

over who should cover the additional costs.

"I think this resolution lands in the right place," Commissioner Cindy Domenico said of the county's decision to pay for some of the cost overruns. "It's been a long time coming, and there are a lot of lessons learned."

The tiny town south of Boulder was forced to consider building a sewer system after Boulder County Public Health determined in 1999 that there were only 13 approved septic systems in the town, which has more than 130 houses.

When Eldorado Springs residents passed the ballot measure in 2004 — which bound homeowners to pay back the loans over 20 years as part of a local improvement district — many believed that costs would be capped at \$1.8 million. But the county commissioners are legally allowed to increase the money owed by a local improvement district without a vote if no new bonds are sold.

And the commissioners who

approved the ballot language in 2004 — none of whom now serve on the board — appear to have doubted that \$1.8 million would realistically cover the cost of the project from the beginning. But community members said a larger bond measure would not be supported. And in fact, a larger bond measure had failed in Eldorado Springs the year before.

Once the bond measure passed, the county managed the project. So when cost overruns began to pile up, residents blamed the county for poor supervision, and many argued that the county should bear the costs. The long struggle has strained the relationship between the county staff and locals.

Tuesday's decision was a compromise between the parties, and while Eldorado Springs residents were grateful, many said work still needs to be done to improve communication between the county and the small town.

"Everyone's happy to get to the conclusion of this," said

Eldorado Springs resident Joseph Palumbo, who called the compromise fair. "But I think it would be a missed opportunity if there's not a chance for reflection on what did go wrong here. ... Somewhere along the line, let's hope, we can all learn something from this."

The commissioners largely agreed with the residents that they would not like to see the experience repeated.

"I agree with the folks who have said that this is a learning experience," said Commissioner Will Toor. "I think that we need to be very cognizant of what analysis and decisions need to be made up front on any future similar project. And I very much agree with the comment about having very clear lines of communication. ... But I do think that, fundamentally, despite these challenges, it has been a successful project. We now have a working sewer system in Eldorado Springs."

Contact Camera Staff Writer Laura Snider at 303-473-1327 or [sniderl@dailycamera.com](mailto:sniderl@dailycamera.com).