

# The Register-Guard

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## NEWS

# EWEB water reservoir construction in South Hills set to begin despite neighborhood concerns

*eservoir project in an urban forest in south Eugene is set to begin next month, but ire pushing back*

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A massive construction effort the Eugene Water & Electric Board says is crucial to the long-term functionality of the local drinking water system is set to begin next month.

The plan to construct two new 7.5 million-gallon reservoirs on a nearly 11-acre property, owned by EWEB, in Eugene's South Hills will help assure fires and earthquakes cannot disrupt the flow of drinking water to city residents, EWEB officials said. But some neighbors are upset the construction will require tree-cutting, earth-blasting and three years of heavy truck traffic.

And some feel the project near East 40th Avenue is being jammed down their throats.

The existing drinking water reservoirs in Eugene are reaching the end of their lifespans and won't withstand earthquakes, EWEB Senior Engineer Laura Farthing said. The new reservoirs will allow EWEB to take the other reservoirs offline for upgrades and replacement.

Constructing the two reservoirs will require the removal of at least 265 of the more than 1,150 trees on the site, many of which are mature firs, she said. Though installing the reservoirs will change the character of the area, she said it's been the plan for decades.

"It's why we bought this site," Farthing said. "If there was somewhere easier to put them that didn't have anybody around or any trees or any impacts, we'd already have done it."

But a number of people living around the EWEB-owned forest just north of Spencer Butte Middle School believe the utility didn't do enough to tell them about the project.

"What we want is what should happen in any project this massive: public notification and input," said Samuel Schmieding, who lives nearby. "The public deserves to have input."

Sandra Bishop's home is adjacent to the coming construction site and has known for some time about plans to build a reservoir there. But she said the decision to build two tanks instead of one was a surprise. She believes residents weren't properly informed.

"It's unconscionable. It is irresponsible for any local jurisdiction to take an infrastructure project that is this large that has this much impact and to arbitrarily decide to build two," she said. "EWEB seems to be tone-deaf to the broad implications of what they're doing."

The original plan for the site called for building one storage tank first and the second years later, but that plan changed in March on the recommendation of EWEB-contracted arborists and engineers, according to utility spokesman Joe Harwood.

Their analysis suggested it would be cheaper and less disruptive to build both at once, Harwood said.

**More:** EWEB report: Eugene drinking water clean, but at risk after Holiday Farm Fire

The final plan, including building both tanks at once, was approved in April.

Harwood said the change did not affect the number of trees that were going to be cut down to facilitate the project because EWEB planned to prep both sites concurrently.

There was no reason to include the public in discussions about the changing plan because EWEB relies on experts, not residents, to make infrastructure choices, he said.

Harwood denies there hasn't been sufficient opportunity for the public to speak on the matter over the past year and claims more public input on the project is unnecessary.

"We've had testimony in almost every commissioners meeting since March of 2020," he said. "In term of siting the tank, you don't put it where it has the least impact on the view. You put it where it needs to be, at the elevation it needs to be at so it works."

Though EWEB has conducted multiple meetings over the course of the last year with area residents and civic organizations, Schmieding and Bishop argue not enough people had access or information because the pandemic required them to be virtual.

The construction process promises to be a massive undertaking, including a six- to eight-month excavation process that will include drilling, sirens and controlled blasting. Area streets will be crowded with construction trucks until the process is finished in mid-2024.

"It's a necessary change for the entire community. But it's going to be hard. It is unfortunate we can't do this without taking down some of the trees," Farthing said.

## **The project**

Upgrades to make the entire EWEB drinking water system earthquake-resistant have been ongoing for years, starting with intake systems and the Hayden Bridge filtration plant. By 2015, EWEB knew upgrading its College Hill reservoir would be too expensive.

The 15 million-gallon reservoir is one of three existing drinking water storage units for Eugene, including the 20 million-gallon Hawkins Hill reservoir and the 20 million-gallon Santa Clara reservoir, the only one that operates exclusively using pump stations.

The others are built at an elevation of 607 feet, and the rest of the local water system is designed to function with water flowing down from that elevation with the force of gravity.

"Everything in the water system was designed specifically for that elevation: the pumps, transmission, piping. Everybody's water services are dependent on 607 feet," Farthing said. "And that's why EWEB purchased the property at East 40th Avenue in the 1950s."

Before the 80-year-old College Hill reservoir is replaced, it's necessary to bring online another reservoir, the East 40th Avenue site, to keep adequate pressure on the system so water continues flowing.

Establishing fencing and erosion control around the project site will begin in the last two weeks of July, limited to the construction zone on the northeast side of the property. The west and south sides will remain open to the public during most phases of construction.

Once construction equipment arrives soon after, a security contractor will be onsite 24-hours a day at the Patterson Street entrance, as a temporary security measure.

Work on the East 40th Avenue site is set to begin in early August with tree removal and pre-excavation work, Farthing said. A contractor will be hired to survey homes within 500 feet of the construction zone to assure they will not be damaged by any blasting activity.

Tree-cutting and chipping will take place there for about a month. There will be chainsaw and chipper noises, as well as regular truck traffic, on weekdays ending around 4 p.m.

**Other construction projects:** Riverfront Park, linking downtown Eugene and UO campus, now opening in August

A six- to eight-month excavation process will begin around the end of August, Farthing said. It is during this time that controlled explosions and drilling will be used to break up ground where tanks will be placed. Sirens will sound before each blast, Farthing said.

"That's the hardest part of these tank projects," Farthing said.

Project details on EWEB's website report building the two new tanks concurrently will save \$1.4 million and reduce by 2,100 the number of needed construction truckloads.

EWEB estimates the entire project will require 15,000 total truckloads.

Construction of the partly underground reservoir tanks will be finished by the end of 2023, Farthing said. The tanks will be operational before restoration landscaping begins.

EWEB plans to invite the site's neighbors to participate in deciding what landscaping and types of amenities will be on parts of the property not used for the storage tanks.

The total project cost is expected to be about \$12.5 million.

Once the new reservoirs are activated, Farthing said the replacement process for tanks at College Hill and Hawkins Hill can begin, giving the city six modernized reservoirs.

## **Fighting for the forest**

With the chainsaws soon to be revving up to bring down about 25% of the trees on the EWEB property, residents opposing the project are doing what they can to get noticed.

"It's never too late," Schmieding said. "The whole city needs to know about this."

Beyond the constant noise of heavy machines, the thousands of truck trips that will come and go from the site over the years of construction and the wail of blasting sirens, locals such as Schmieding see the project as a coming human and environmental disaster.

"This is the forest that I grew up in," Schmieding said. "It makes it emotional for me."

EWEB has always allowed open access to the future site of the reservoirs. While most of the property still will be accessible, the small urban forest soon will be changed forever.

Schmieding believes everyone in the area will feel that change in one way or another.

"Everybody has different political and cultural perspectives. Some do understand the climate change issue. Some people are just going to look at aesthetics. Others will look at economic values, because this will impact the ability to sell homes," Schmieding said.

**More:** Volunteers help EWEB restore oak savanna, now a 'scattered relic,' at water storage tank site

A particularly sensitive part of the debate concerns the removal of mature fir trees from the site, with project opponents pointing to the heat-reduction value of urban forests and the increasingly evident reach of climate change through drought and natural disaster.

EWEB is working to restore an oak savanna on the site. The native landscape, which has dwindled over time, supports more than 180 species that are in decline and trees that are more suited for the drier environments. But while it will be some time before recently planted oaks mature, the coming cull of mature trees will be swift.

"Keeping the trees is the main emphasis I've been hearing," EWEB Commissioner John Barofsky, whose ward contains the East 40th Avenue project, said of locals' complaints.

Barofsky joined the EWEB Board of Commissioners in January with much of the project planning already complete, but he joined the vote this year to approve final site plans.

"I agreed with it. For the community as a whole, the 200,000 customers that will benefit from this in the long run, that it was the right decision to site the tanks there," he said.

Bishop, a former EWEB commissioner, has been calling for a pause on the project.

"We need some new water storage capacity, that's not a question," she said. "What the neighbors want is for EWEB to go back to the original plan to build one reservoir here."

Bishop believes EWEB chose engineering expediency over larger, regionwide issues.

Barofsky said he's heard residents' concerns but believes the right choices were made.

"Staff has done an appropriate job of looking at all of the alternatives that were available to us. This is the most economical and practical way to move forward," Barofsky said.

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