City vows cleared area won't be an eyesore

RED: 'It just seemed unprofessional,' Gilster said

BY ANDREW MOORE
THE JOURNAL

SENECA — Seneca officials are vowing to turn what is currently an empty swath of red clay surrounding the city's water treatment plant into an aesthetically pleasing asset for the community.

That's the company line offered by Utilities Director Bob Faires on Tuesday in the face of outrage being expressed by neighbors opposed to the city's clear-cutting actions.

Faires said that although the city does not yet have a plan for landscaping the area, whatever is done will be geared toward providing a natural screen between the residents and the plant and will be aimed at reducing runoff.

"We'll have some plans put together soon. I don't have an exact timeframe for when that will be, but it will be within a few weeks. It won't be a year from now," Faires said.

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Crews from Thrift Brothers Construction were still at work Tuesday near Seneca's water treatment facility. The clear-cutting of about three-quarters of an acre of wooded property in Normandy Shores has given rise to some concern by residents, but city officials say the area will be thoroughly landscaped.

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"We're going to do some hydroseeding along the bank, but that won't be a final plan."

Faires said the three-quarters of an acre of wooded property surrounding the water plant was cut down because residents whose properties were directly adjacent to the city-owned land requested tree removal. He also said clearing the woods allows the city to re-establish a fence line for security.

But, while Faires got the go-ahead from five homeowners whose property abuts the city property, he acknowledged he did not consult with other residents in the area who might have sightlines to the water plant, which was once hidden by hundreds of trees.

"I met with Cycnia Gilster (president) of the (Normandy Shores) Homeowners Association and I apologized for not including them. It just wasn't something on the top of my mind," Faires said. "If I would have known that they would have gotten upset about this, I would have let them know."

Gilster is one of several Normandy Shores residents who has a problem not just with the project itself, but with the way it was carried out.

"It just seemed unprofessional," Gilster said. "It seems like this was a situation where they're saying 'Let's ask for forgiveness, rather than permission, and do whatever we want to do.'"

Gilster said home values will "plummet" because many homes now look out on empty land instead of a forest.

She decried what she perceived as a lack of communication between the city and the community affected by the project. City Councilman Ernest Riley, who lives in the Normandy Shores community, either was not aware of the project or chose not to make others aware of it.

"We had an association meeting in March and not once did he mention this project, and it was a 2 1/2-hour meeting," Gilster said.

Faires said the city did not do an environmental impact study, an issued raised by residents, and added that a project on a piece of land this size does not require one.

"No, there was not," Faires said when asked about a study. "It's done for anything over an acre of land. Right now, the area being cleared is slightly less than an acre."

Currently, the city has applied silt fences to the area to prevent runoff into a gully and the nearby cove.

Faires reiterated that the city was in talks with an architect who would come up with a plan to provide natural protection against erosion and runoff while also providing a barrier between residents and the plant.

Some residents, such as County Councilman Archie Barron, however, are still displeased.

"I'm very disappointed in the clear-cutting. I've lived in this area for 36 years and the water plant has always been a hidden facility. Very few people who ride through or visit even know the plant is there. Now, of course, it's a terrible eyesore," Barron said. "I'm very concerned about the effect on the value of my home. There's no question it affects the value of my home. It affects the whole area. That's the way real estate works.

"Regardless of how well it's landscaped or how pretty the building might eventually be, that's not the object. The object is for people to not know the plant is there; that can't be restored."

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