

Corning works as one

Volunteers invest "sweat equity" for new pipelines, meters

Who says nothing ever happens in a small town? This summer, an all-volunteer group of workers in Nemaha County's Corning community completed a project to replace the town's aging municipal water distribution system, including water lines and fire hydrants.

Thanks to the free labor provided by more than 200 volunteers, Corning's city council got the water system upgrade without incurring any additional municipal debt, thanks to a "sweat equity" grant program known as KAN STEP, sponsored by the Kansas Department of Commerce.

And as a bonus, townspeople in Corning, population 170, discovered that working together for the common good can bring a new sense of togetherness, said city clerk Diane Haverkamp.

"We have a very strong community," she said. "It was a totally awesome community effort. When you live in a small community, everybody gets involved."

Under provisions of the KAN STEP program, Corning received a \$237,000 KAN STEP grant, mostly for materials and professional services. This represented almost 60 percent of the total estimated "retail" cost of the project, which was \$425,000.

In exchange, Corning's city council organized local volunteers as the general labor force — representing the remaining cost of the project.

City officials estimated that the project, which began in June, would require eight months to complete. But the locals

managed to wrap up the job at the end of August, even after taking a couple of weeks off during the heat of July, said Mayor Connie Steinlage.

— Kansas Department of Commerce

\$12,205,043. Because local people donate labor to construct the facilities, the cost has been reduced to \$6,658,266 for a 55% overall reduction.

KAN STEP PROJECTS AWARDED IN 2004

Name	Project	Awarded	Total Retail Cost	CDBG Amount
Downs	Fire Station	4/8/2004	\$ 343,632	\$ 206,179
Onaga	Senior Center	5/1/2004	\$ 384,658	\$ 230,000
Lincolnvile	Community Bldg	7/16/2004	\$ 302,773	\$ 181,664
Arcadia	Fire Station	7/19/2004	\$ 350,000	\$ 207,243
Selden	Community Bldg.	9/3/2004	\$ 177,884	\$ 106,312
	Fire Station /			
Belvue	Comm. Bldg.	9/14/2004	\$ 398,531	\$ 229,961
Grenola	Senior Center	9/30/2004	\$ 152,140	\$ 91,060
Hartford	Community Bldg.	10/15/2004	\$ 687,664	\$ 398,537
	Addition to Fire			
Grinnell	Station	10/20/2004	\$ 237,854	\$ 142,621
Bunker Hill	Community Bldg.	11/1/2004	\$ 180,683	\$ 108,289
		Total	\$3,215,819	\$1,901,866

KAN STEP

Projects eligible for KAN STEP funding are municipal water and sewer systems and community buildings, such as fire stations and senior centers.

As of October 2004, KAN STEP has 15 projects completed. There are 15 projects under contract or in progress.

Architectural or engineering services have been assigned to 11 additional projects. And 16 additional projects are in earlier stages of development. The total retail value of projects completed or under construction as of October 29, 2004 is

"They say nothing happens in small towns, but we'd start at 8 in the morning with the day crews," Steinlage said, "then others would pick up during the evening, and we'd work until 10 o'clock. A couple of nights we had to bring in the fire trucks and use that as lighting so we could keep working."

The project involved replacing 21,000 feet of pipeline and more than 100 household water meters and fire hydrants. Steinlage estimated that volunteers contributed 4,185 hours of work toward the project.

Individuals and local businesses donated another 478 hours of equipment use, including skidloaders, bulldozers, trenching machines and backhoes.

"A lot of the volunteer work involved people getting right down in the trenches," Steinlage said, "drilling and pouring concrete around shutoff valves, and setting in fire hydrants. It wasn't easy work, and it wasn't always hunky-dory, but people told us they were dedicated to it, and they just kept going."

Workers in Corning make the final connection in August between the new water distribution system and the elevated storage tank.

Before the decision to go with the KAN STEP program, the city council rejected a 2001 proposal from a professional engineering firm that recommended an \$889,000 project — tied to a USDA loan of \$245,000 — that would have raised the average monthly household water bill by \$20 for the next 40 years, Haverkamp said.

Homeowners' water bills in Corning after construction of the new water system average about \$35 per month, which includes trash collection and sewer service, she said.

"Even at that, we had to raise the rates \$5 a month with the KAN STEP grant just to

prove we were serious," Haverkamp said. "We have a lot of low-income people in town, and it would create a hardship to raise them to higher levels."

Throughout Corning's summer-season work schedule, staff members from Kansas Rural Water Association stood shoulder to shoulder with the local volunteers, providing on-site inspection and technical assistance as the work proceeded.

"It's been more like 'pitching in,'" said Elmer Ronnebaum, KRWA's director. "We've purchased laser transits, power trowels, concrete saws and a cache of cordless tools to help the locals accomplish these projects. Plus, our guys were right there alongside and leading the locals. The program has instilled a lot of local pride because people make a personal investment. It's truly 'their' facility."

Corning's KAN STEP undertaking is one of 16 similar community-development projects that are either authorized or under construction in Kansas — all in communities

with fewer than 1,500 residents, officials said.

During the current calendar year, KAN STEP officials have awarded \$1.9 million in available grant funds for eight



Volunteers at Corning are shown installing the last section of pipeline, connecting the water storage tank to the main which was installed earlier in the project. The above photo was taken by KRWA Tech Pete Koenig who was instrumental as both inspector and worker.

separate projects. Funding has been provided by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

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