

Foul Air

Those living near Cameron's two prisons complain of odor

By **JOE LOUDON**
C-O News Editor

Many of Laura Olsen's "neighbors" are convicted murderers and rapists. That's not the problem — not as long as those men remain confined inside the "lethal" fence enclosure around the Crossroads Correctional Center.

The problem is the smell emitting from the sewage treatment system at the prison.

A half-dozen Cameron residents living near the Crossroads and Western Missouri correctional centers gathered last Wednesday afternoon (May 26) at Olsen's home — less than a full quarter-mile from the prison sewage lagoon on Pence Road — to discuss the foul air they sometimes find themselves choking on. Sixth District State Rep. Randall Relford was there to listen and answer questions.

"I'd rather live on a pig farm than live out here and smell this," lamented a frustrated Olsen as the meeting concluded.

"Oh, yeah. We smell it too," Crossroads Superintendent Mike Kemna said last Friday. "I have no doubts about the legitimacy of these folks' complaints."

Reducing The Workload

Over a two-year span, Olsen has voiced her complaints to the City of Cameron, the Environmental Protection Agency and various state agencies, including the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and Department of Corrections. She has called Relford so often that she now "knows his number by heart."

"We've had a problem ever since they built the (Crossroads) prison — ever since they built that lagoon," said Mary Pickering, another Pence Road resident.

Phil Webster of the Cameron Waste/Water Treatment Plant describes the prison lagoon as a "pre-treatment" system designed to act as a filter of sorts, breaking down solids before passing the waste onto the city system.

The "lagoon process" was designed in either late 1993 or early 1994 with the intent of only being used for the Western Missouri facility, according to Cameron City Manager Phil Lammers. In 1996 it was "oversized to take care of expansion," he said, in an attempt to accommodate Crossroads.



“I shouldn’t say lagoons ‘stink.’ They just tend to have a smell,” said Webster. “Lagoons work, but the odor can get exaggerated when the system gets overloaded. You have to reduce the load the lagoon is handling, so the system operates properly.”

Searching For Solutions

Relford assured the group at Olsen’s home last Wednesday that the search for short- and long-term solutions to the problem is underway, but he noted, “You’ve been patient enough long enough. There’s no excuse for it. This is a problem that should be taken care of.”

And it will be taken care of as soon as possible, stated Kemna.

“We’ve got a lot of people looking into the problem,” he said, “and they’ve had a series of meetings this week, trying to narrow it down and find out what exactly needs to be done.”

The problem isn’t the city’s, stressed Relford.

“It’s a Department of Correction’s problem,” he said. “It’s their facility. It’s their responsibility.”

A DNR waste management expert along with engineers from the firm that designed the lagoon were to visit the site this week, according to Tim Kniest, the Department of Corrections’ public information officer.

Additional aerators will be installed to pump more oxygen into the prison treatment system, Kniest added. Oxygen, Lammers explained, generates the “beneficial bacteria” needed to break down the solid waste.

“When there isn’t enough oxygen, instead of breaking down, the solid waste just rots,” Lammers said. “What you end up with is suspended solids.”

A foamy sludge has built up to such an extreme on some occasions, Olsen said, that the lagoon has overran its banks.

“It looks like it has snowed,” she said.

Temporary Fix

The waste both prisons produce simply overwhelm the lagoon system on occasion.

“There’s almost 5,000 inmates between the two facilities, and you’ve got maybe 600 or 700 employees 24 hours a day,” Relford said. “We’re talking about a lot of waste. Scrape out your garbage disposal and think about how much waste just you and your family produces.”

When the lagoon becomes overburdened the waste from the Western Missouri facility has been diverted directly into the city sewage system. For the past two weeks, that temporary fix has improved the odor around the prisons and — in Lammer’s words — “given the lagoon time to get healthy.”

“This is the third time in the last two or three years we’ve had to do that,” Webster said. “That cuts the burden on the lagoon by about one-half.

“But that’s only a short-term solution.”

Foul Air (Sidebar)

Illnesses blamed on horrid smell

By **JOE LOUDON**

C-O News Editor

The smell has frequently — and quite literally — been sickening.

After having their own homes checked and, in some cases, rechecked for possible septic system malfunctions, several neighbors living near Cameron's two prisons have reached the same conclusion: An ill wind blows from the Crossroads and Western Missouri correctional centers. And Missouri Department of Corrections officials don't deny that they've got a sewage odor problem at their Cameron facilities.

"The smell gets all through your house," said Laura Olsen, who lives across from the prisons on Pence Road. "It's like a glue. It sticks to your clothes and furniture. You can't get rid of it.

"And you can't get used to it."

In the two years since the prisons' septic lagoon was constructed, Olsen said she and her children have suffered chronically from throat funguses, sinus infections and headaches. Mary Pickering, another Pence Road resident, has emphysema (a respiratory ailment), and she pointed out, "I don't need to be breathing this."

"Sometimes the smell will knock you over," Kathy Johnson said. "My oldest daughter gets sick to her stomach whenever she comes to visit us."

No Violations

An environmental specialist from the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) conducted tests at the prison sewage-treatment site last week and detected "no violations of any regulations," according to Mike Kniest, the Department of Corrections' public information officer. But there is definitely a foul odor in and around the prisons, Crossroads Superintendent Mike Kemna noted.

Often Olsen and her children as well as the family dog must seek refuge inside her house, closing all windows and only venturing outdoors on an absolutely necessary basis.

"It's gotten to the point where, if you live out here, you can't have a picnic outside in your own yard," reflected Olsen's mother, Grace Daniels.

"On the worst days," Olsen said, "all you can do is go inside, close all the windows, turn on the air conditioner and pray."

As Olsen and her neighbors met last Wednesday (May 26) at Olsen's home to voice their grievances, Sixth District State Representative Randall Relford told the group that action was being taken to solve the problem. On what was a mild, sun-soaked spring afternoon, Relford said, "As long as it stays like this, you'll be just fine."

But as the meeting drew to a close, a cool breeze stirred up the sour air, and Olsen winced.

"Sunday (May 23) was a really bad day," she said. "You couldn't stand to be outside at all. You didn't even want to breath; it was so thick and so bad."

Move Being Considered

Her voice trembling and eyes welling up, Olsen added that she is considering a move. After two years of trying to cope with the problem, she explained that her patience “has gotten pretty thin.”

“I’m tired of being sick,” she said.

Kemna emphasized that he wants the problem to be dealt with by the Department of Corrections and DNR with a sense of urgency. The Department of Corrections “doesn’t want its staff or neighbors having these difficulties,” said Kniest.

“I understand there has been some improvement (in the odor) since Western began going through the city (sewage) system,” Kniest said.

“It has been better this week,” said Olsen last Friday.

But two days earlier, Olsen had observed that the smell never seems to go away for long.

“I don’t think we’ve ever gone two weeks with it smelling good,” she said. “It’s nice today, but will it be nice tomorrow?”

Olsen’s mother has repeatedly contacted DNR and Department of Corrections personnel, demanding action be taken to permanently clear the air around the prisons.

“I’ve been calling a lot of people,” Daniels said. “They’re going to be getting sick of me.”