

Wilsey, city and trailhead with a future

The city of Wilsey, Kansas is located in central Morris County. It once was a busy little town on the Missouri Pacific railroad, between Council Grove and Herington. Like many communities in the Midwest, Wilsey is not as busy as it used to be. Very few people have heard of Wilsey and because the town is a mile from US Highway 56; it is not visible to most motorists. This story however, is not about what once was, but what is and what will be.

For years, the homes, businesses, churches and schools of Wilsey used water pumped from small, on-site, domestic wells. Most were satisfied with personal water systems and rarely gave a second thought to the water

being used. That changed in 1997 when the town was added to the State Water Plan Contamination Remediation Program (SWPCRP). The town was then formally identified by the Kansas

Department of Health and Environment as the Wilsey Ground Water Contamination Site. Tests of water samples taken from many of the wells were conducted prior to the community receiving this title. Laboratory results showed that most wells in Wilsey had nitrate levels exceeding the safe drinking water standards. The source of this contamination has not been determined but it is likely that all past nitrate-producing human activities in town

(fertilizers, waste disposal, etc.) have contributed to contamination of the local aquifer.

Now, more than seven years later, the city of Wilsey is on the verge of owning the newest water system in Kansas. Contractors are ready to begin drilling two new

installed to bring high quality water to every home and business.

Because the city of Wilsey has worked so hard to make this project a reality, the town's leadership wants the water system to be installed correctly, efficiently and under budget. They also

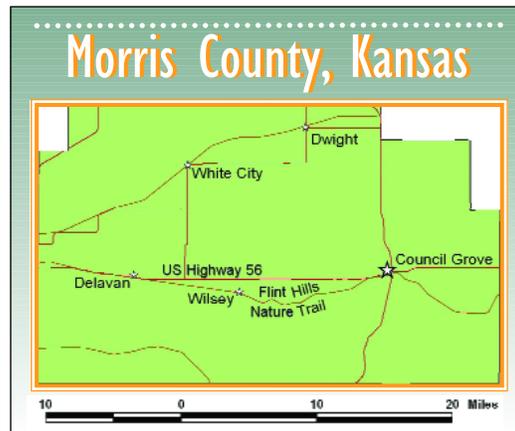
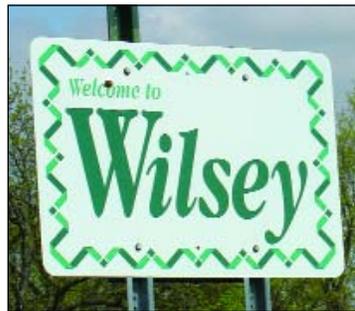
Protection of the water before it comes under control of pumps and piping is the purpose of every wellhead protection plan and the city of Wilsey is working at it before the wells are even drilled!

municipal wells, and soon a pipeline will be installed to carry the water to town from the well sites. A water storage tank will be erected to provide water pressure; a distribution system will be

understand that the investment of time and money in this project will require continued oversight and maintenance. A portion of this oversight is to reduce the inherent risks of operating a water system. Protection of the water before it comes under control of pumps and piping is the purpose of every wellhead protection plan and the city of Wilsey is working at it before the wells are even drilled! In April of this year, they adopted the first version of their wellhead protection plan.

The wells will be approximately 110 feet deep and located in a limestone aquifer. The wells will penetrate shale formations before reaching the saturated limestone formation. These shale formations may or may not provide much protection from activities on the surface, depending on the fracturing within the shale. Although the water quality is acceptable at this time

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Nowak Construction Project Foreman Pat Svoboda, Kramer Engineering's Doug McDaniel and Wilsey Mayor Sylvester Sauder.

implying that the shale does adequately prevent contaminants from reaching the groundwater, the city will be working with the landowners in the immediate area to help them understand the importance of proper fertilizer application and herbicide use. The Morris County District Conservationist will also be a



wells are in close proximity, it was logical to ask for permission to place the supply pipeline along this right of way to deliver the water to town. For the price of allowing trail users access to drinking water, an agreement was reached. Now that a wellhead protection plan is in place that



Water supply pipe is laid in the right-of-way of the former Missouri Pacific Railroad after adoption of the wellhead protection plan. Planning continues on the conversion of the old railbed from Ottawa to Herington into the Flint Hills Nature Trail.

identifies the trail as a potential partner to protect water quality, the Horseman's Foundation will be asked to stay involved in the water supply project. They will be asked to place the highest priority possible on the prevention of illegal dumping and the limited use of herbicides along the trail.

Another potential partner identified is the Rural Lakes Local Environmental Protection Program in Junction City. Their expertise with domestic wells will be

resource to explain existing programs like the Continuous Conservation Reserve Program to the landowners in the area. It is also important that friendly relations be established with people who live near the wells, to let them know that their presence and their observations will also help keep the facilities secure from persons with ill intent.

In addition to the partnership with the local residents and the USDA's local employees, the city of Wilsey has already reached an agreement with the Kansas Horseman Foundation. The Horseman Foundation is the manager of the old Missouri Pacific Railroad right-of-way. They have hopes to convert the railbed into the Flint Hills Nature Trail, connecting the cities of Herington and Ottawa. As the right-of-way already exists and the

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sought, to ensure that wells being used are safe for public use and, for the city of Wilsey's benefit, not contributing to contamination



A Nowak trenching crew makes its way down the trail towards Wilsey's new well field, burying water line.

of the aquifer. Their expertise with septic systems will also be used.

The city of Wilsey may appear to be like most small towns in Kansas. However, it could be argued that Wilsey has an exceptional mayor and city council with great vision and understanding.

Not only do they understand the basic need for their citizens to have a dependable water system that delivers clean water at a reasonable cost, but they also understand that all efforts could be for naught if aquifer

contamination were to occur.

Here's to you, city of Wilsey, for a job well done! Your stewardship of the natural resources is a fine example for all water systems to observe.

To learn more of what's involved in developing a workable Ground Water or Source Water Protection plan, I hope you will call KRWA at (785) 336-3760 or call me directly at (785) 799-6106. We can discuss this at a board or council meeting or otherwise start with utility staff.



The Wilsey Market storefront in downtown Wilsey harkens from times past but still provides residents a place to shop for the essentials.

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