Although the future of Hattiesburg's wastewater treatment isn't set in stone, Hattiesburg City Council members on Monday announced some recent changes to the city's lagoons that may allow that system to be used extensively.

"Primarily, we needed different oversight to make sure that we're meeting our limits and that it's maintained properly," Ward 2 Councilwoman Deborah Delgado said. "We've been through a lot, so it's time to step up."

The first step was to approve Carey Hardin, engineer with Clearwater Consultants in Starkville, as consultant for the lagoons.

"I don't know of a better lagoon engineer in the state and probably in the region," City Council President Carter Carroll said. "So he is there, he is under contract. We can call him at any time to get his advice. He's going to come down here, look at the entire lagoon system, and give us any advice as to what he would do to prepare."

The city also has extended its contract with L&A Contracting of Hattiesburg. That firm — which was primarily in charge of aeration of the lagoons — will now take over entire management of the lagoons and will be in charge of cleaning, aeration, blowers and the diffusion system in the lagoons.

"That diffusion system, it's made up of about 1,500 different stainless-steel pieces, and that's where the air comes through," Carroll said. "Currently, we're probably at a quarter of those working."
To help move the process along, city officials have contracted with engineer Steve Mitchell, who will assist L&A Contracting with properly cleaning the diffusion system in an attempt to get 100 percent of the system working.

"From what they tell me, if we're meeting our (limits) right now with a quarter of them working, imagine what all of them working will do," Carroll said.

The city also has entered into a contract with APG-Neuros in Canada, which will assist with the lagoon's blowers. Once that is complete, Rod Dickerson, engineer with Dickerson Consultants in Homer, Louisiana, has been authorized to test a patent-pending microbiological technology on the lagoons.

At an earlier council meeting, Dickerson said the service has no capital cost to the city and is purely performance-based. The treatment will start at lagoon cell 1 and work its way through each lagoon, taking about 90 days at each cell before a sample is taken.

"That way we'll know the discharge we have from cell 1 before the microbes go in there," Carroll said. "And the nice thing about it is, if something does go wrong in cell 1, we'll have 90 days to get it fixed.

"So (Gulf Restoration Network) and (Mississippi Department of Environmental Quality) have been alerted of what our plans are. I think we're making some great strides into making these lagoons healthy and working."

Ward 5 Councilman Henry Naylor addressed the recent odor caused by the lagoons, which he said had been brought to his attention by several residents. Naylor said the odor apparently was caused by some non-functioning aeration in cell 3, which has since been fixed.

"That was my primary concern, as it was everybody else's — to make sure that they were up and running. And now they are," he said.

In early August, council members voted to go ahead with a $135 million mechanical treatment plant after tossing aside plans for a land application system to fix the city's wastewater woes. The city already had faced two sets of $1,500-per-day fines after missing a court-ordered deadline to have design plans for a new system finalized and submitted to not only the appropriate state and federal agencies for approval, but also to the U.S. District Court that is overseeing a suit brought by Gulf Restoration Network.

But a recent meeting with MDEQ and Gulf Restoration Network, during which a new timeline was agreed to, gave city officials a chance to step back and look a little closer at the lagoons as a sole wastewater treatment system.

"We want to make sure we've done everything we're supposed to do to keep (the lagoons) going," Delgado said. "We still don't know what our limits are going to be in the future — that's something that we'll have to look at in the future.

"But right now, we need to keep what we have in place so that we're able to maintain our limits."

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