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Village of Belgium trustees are now convinced canning company is committed to addressing complaints

The two most vocal critics of Lakeside Foods' efforts to eliminate the odors coming from its wastewater lagoon system in Belgium turned into big fans of company after meeting with officials and learning what's being done.

Trustees Ken Hirschmann and Jason Acevedo told the board Monday that they believe the company is on the right track and has a plan that will solve the problem.

"They know they have a problem. They're working on it very hard," Hirschmann said. "But it's not going to happen overnight."

Lakeside Foods is installing a new aeration system that will keep the wastewater moving year-around, which should eliminate the foul smells in spring. The current system is shut down in winter, and the odor is worst in spring when use of the lagoon starts up again. The new aerators will keep the water moving, even under ice.

In addition, two filtering systems will remove much of the solids before it enters the lagoon.

"When bacteria is alive, it doesn't stink," Acevedo said. "When it's dead, it stinks. It's very impressive what they're doing. I want to say, 'Hats off to them.'"

He also praised Neil Anderson, wastewater superintendent, who told the board the company is working on the problem and committed to solving it, but that vegetable waste is difficult to treat.

"Seeing you interact with them, I have more faith in what you said because I see what you're talking about," Acevedo told Anderson.

"Realistically, I think the village is looking at one to 1-1/2 years of smells. What's taking so long is they were so quick to react to try to make the village happy. Everything they've done up until now hasn't produced the results they're aiming for."

The odors were particularly bad this year because the lagoon was drained so the new system can be installed, Jeromy Nickelsen, Belgium plant manager, had said.

Currently, green beans are being canned and the wastewater is easy to treat. However, when beets and potatoes are canned, there is more starch, sugar and dirt involved.

The village's wastewater treatment plant treats effluent with a biochemical oxygen demand of 250, which is the same for green beans, but potato waste has an oxygen demand more than 60 times higher, Anderson said.

The trustees told Nickelsen he should update the company's complaint line to inform people what's being done.

"Their goal is to work with the community. I was skeptical of the things they were doing after all these years with the smell," Acevedo said. "They know they're stuff. They need to be more proactive on their answering service.

"Whenever there's a smell, I call and as soon as there's a beep, I start yelling. I was extremely negative. I can't stand the smell."

It was also suggested that information on what Lakeside is doing to reduce the odors be put on the village's Web site and in its newsletter

Anderson will serve as the liaison between the company and the Village Board, Acevedo said.

"Be patient because when they change systems, it takes time to work out the bugs," Anderson said. "The odors in the spring when they start up should be less with the ability to keep the process alive through the winter."

Hirschmann said he asked Nickelsen to come to a meeting once a quarter to update the board, and he agreed to do that.

"He wants to work with us and doesn't want to be the bearer of bad news all the time," Hirschmann said.

The improvements will cost between $125,000 and $500,000, Nickelsen has said.