

Earth Day: Flush with Concern

Wiley-Ahtanum: History
and Current Crisis



Agenda

1. **Welcome & Purpose of Meeting**

Who we are, why we're here today, and what has been done

2. **Past: How We Got Here**

History of the issue and decisions that led to today's challenges

3. **Present: Current Conditions & Urgency**

What's happening on the ground today, system failures, and community impact

4. **Future: A Path Forward**

The local solution, what it could look like, and what it will take to implement

5. **Our Ask: Partnership & Support Needed**

Specific actions and commitments needed from city and county leadership



Who Am I?



Shaelyn Molvik
Executive Director-Secretary
Ahtanum Irrigation District

Ahtanum Irrigation District (AID)

- Has been serving Wiley City since 1918
- Only local entity responsible for managing water delivery
- Oversees irrigation across the north side of Ahtanum Creek
- Operated by a small, two-person team
- Working to make irrigation more reliable and sustainable long-term
- Facing a growing wastewater challenge in the community
- Stepping in to help elevate the issue and drive solutions



Why Are We Here? Wiley City Is a Community in Crisis

The Problem

Without clear ownership or coordinated action, Wiley City/Ahtanum has been held back from growth, with real consequences for the community's health, livelihoods, and future.

The Solution

As leaders in the Valley, the buck stops here. It is our responsibility to confront the past, take ownership, and lead the development of a sustainable wastewater solution for the future of this community.

Today is about sharing information, building understanding, and identifying partners to advance a local solution.



What We've Accomplished

- **2017:** Community effort launched to raise wastewater concerns
- **2021:** AKEL study outlined the cost of extending services from Yakima
- **August 2024:** Ahtanum Irrigation District joined the effort
 - Confirmed legal authority for irrigation districts to own and operate wastewater systems
 - AID Board chose to pursue a local solution with long-term benefits
- **October 2024:** Identified SIED grant as fastest path to fund a feasibility study
 - City of Yakima agreed to apply for and administer \$120,000 in funding
- **Summer 2026:** Feasibility study is now underway, expected completion this summer



Past



Original Conditions & Early Decisions

- **1871** - Original settlement (Hugh Wiley)
- **1910** - Founded the town; In early 1900s, Wiley City was identified as the epicenter of the typhoid epidemic
- **1940** - Census lists 976 residents*
- Historically, Wiley City and the surrounding areas were mostly large agricultural parcels, low-density housing, and farms. This allowed for large drainfields to accommodate a high water table and limited daily wastewater flows.

*encompasses Ahtanum



Whose City is It Anyway?

Past Expectations (1990s)

- Community explored forming “West Valley City”
- UGA designation: Told costs would be similar to join Yakima vs. forming new city
- Urban services were expected and informally promised

What Happened

- Services never fully materialized and longstanding uncertainty around responsibility
- Ongoing question: City or County?

Current State

- Ahtanum Irrigation District stepped in to lead and secured funding to study a local solution
- Focus is no longer who’s responsible, but what gets done



The Perfect Storm: Compounding System Failure

Built for Rural Use

- Early development under rural standards (1920s–1970s)
- Homes were built at low density and designed for individual septic systems

Limited by Soil & Groundwater

- High groundwater / soil limitations identified over time
- High water tables and poor soil absorption in areas reduced septic system effectiveness and longevity

Growth Increased

- UGA designation signaled future urban services
- From 1980s-2000s, rural lots became denser, increasing wastewater loads without centralized sewer expansion

Infrastructure Didn't

- Sewer investment was delayed due to cost, prioritization, and funding constraints
- Infrastructure did not expand to match increasing demand

System Failure

- Today, aging septic systems are failing under high groundwater constraints and increased density



Growth Without Infrastructure

Without wastewater infrastructure, growth, jobs, and community stability are all at risk.



Housing & Development

- Strong investor and developer interest in the West Valley area
- Projects cannot move forward without wastewater infrastructure
- Local business base has declined from 10+ to just 3



Local Employer at Capacity: Gilbert Fruit

- Operating at maximum septic and drainage capacity
- Unable to expand without wastewater infrastructure
- 100+ jobs at risk of being unrealized



Public Infrastructure Strain: Ahtanum Valley Elementary

- Aging facility, built in 1950
- 3 drainage system failures in past 20 years
- Ongoing infrastructure challenges impacting enrollment



The Question Nobody Wants to Ask

What if Wiley City is removed from the UGA?

- Sewer expansion is no longer “growth-consistent”
- Funding becomes more difficult to secure
- Lower density expectations weaken the case for investment

What this means

- We would have to prove a clear need for sewer
- It'd require demonstrating administratively and legally complex agreements (i.e. public health risks)

What we can already show

- Inability of soils to support replacement of drainfields
- Groundwater contamination concerns
- Environmental protection requirements

Waiting makes the problem harder, more complex, and more expensive to solve.



Present



Snapshot of Wiley City

- Unincorporated City in the City of Yakima's UGA
- Estimated population: 1,500-3,000 residents
- 10-20% poverty rates (considered comparable to the Ahtanum census)
- Ahtanum Valley Elementary: 372 students
 - Diverse student population: 37.9% Hispanic/Latino, 56.2% white, 5.9% other
 - 57% Low income
- The West Valley Fairgrounds host Wiley City Rodeo, West Valley Fair and Livestock Show, and other various activities throughout the year



What's Happening Today

Active Issues

- Failing septic systems across Wiley City
- Illegal discharges into the Hughes-Bowman ditch

Why This Matters

- In areas with shallow groundwater, pressurized septic systems present elevated risks of effluent migration and groundwater contamination due to reduced soil treatment capacity

What We're Doing

- In 2024, Irrigation District reduced water flow from the Hughes-Bowman ditch into the state's trust bank. This reduced the saturation of the ground and eliminated some of the risk to the community
- District can not safely convey water through Wiley City until the ground contamination can be addressed



What Residents are Experiencing

- **Records indicate sewer service where none exists:** 20+ properties are listed as “public sewer” in County records, despite no centralized system, with indications of informal or unauthorized connections to existing lines
- **Connections may not reflect formal infrastructure:** Some properties may be tied to Gilbert’s wash water line, and many are located along the stormwater drain
- **Site conditions make compliant septic systems difficult:** Small lot sizes place septic components within feet of homes and roadways, raising questions about where functional drainfields can be located
- **Impacts are visible and documented:** Residents near 97th Ave & Ahtanum Rd have raised concerns about flooding, backups, and serious health issues



Future



Ahtanum Valley Wastewater Solutions

Study Underway

- City of Yakima selected HLA to evaluate a local solution
- Multiple system configurations are being analyzed

Treatment Options Being Considered

- Connection to Yakima (pump station)
- Local treatment systems (Activated Sludge Treatment Plant or Membrane Bioreactor Plant)

Discharging Options

- Support flows in the Hughes-Bowman ditch via Bachelor Creek discharge
- Reduce reliance on deep wells beyond the 87-day irrigation season
- Subsurface discharge could return water underground, helping stabilize groundwater levels that are currently being drawn down



Not just wastewater, this is a new water resource for the Valley.

Phased, Locally Led Solution Is Practical & Achievable

Community + Leadership

- A community that needs help, but is ready to move forward
- Ahtanum Irrigation District (AID) willing to step in and lead

Why AID

- Strong track record of practical, responsible stewardship
- Experience managing complex infrastructure and resources

Phased Approach

- Implementation can be done in 3 defined stages
- Phase 1 focuses on highest-need areas:
 - Gilbert Fruit
 - Ahtanum Valley Elementary
 - Densest residential areas



What It Takes to Get There

Planning & Alignment

- Align land use, zoning, and future growth assumptions support infrastructure investment
- Select treatment and discharge approach by choosing appropriate plant type and effluent disposal method based on site constraints

Design & Approvals

- Complete technical design, SEPA/environmental review, and permitting requirements

Funding & Delivery

- Build funding strategy across federal, state, and local sources to secure capital
- Establish clear project leadership and coordination
- Build, connect, and bring the system online in phased implementation



Momentum Already Building

- **EPA Technical Assistance application in progress**
 - Federal support being pursued to advance planning, feasibility, and technical evaluation.
- **Strong candidates identified for project management and operations**
 - Leadership and operational expertise are being considered to guide implementation.
- **Growing alignment around need for a local solution**
 - Increasing consensus among stakeholders that a coordinated sewer solution is necessary.



Momentum Already Building

This effort is already underway, not starting from zero.



Federal Support

EPA Technical Assistance application in progress.

Federal support being pursued to advance planning, feasibility, and technical evaluation.



Leadership Capacity

Strong candidates identified for project management and operations.

Leadership and operational expertise are being considered to guide implementation.



Stakeholder Alignment

Growing alignment around need for a local solution.

Increasing consensus among stakeholders that a coordinated sewer solution is necessary.



Our Ask



**We are not starting from scratch
- foundational work,
partnerships, and momentum
are already underway!**

**We know you care about the
crisis, all we're asking for is
your support.**

Questions? Call me!

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