

THE
WATCHDAWG
REPORT

Tunnel Dam

Many in Camden County are aware of the possibility of the removal of the “Tunnel Dam” which created and maintains Lake Niangua in southwest Camden County. The dam and hydroelectric plant are owned by Sho-Me Power Electric Cooperative.

Sho-Me has applied to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) advising of licensing surrender and decommissioning of the power plant as of June 2024.

The FERC approval process includes outreach to the Missouri Department of Natural Resources (DNR), Missouri Department of Conservation (MDC), Missouri State Historic Preservation Office, Osage Nation Historic Preservation Office, National Park Service, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). The approval process takes about a year.

The Sho-Me application clearly documents their priority to preserve the Tunnel Dam. It describes their consultation with residents and their desire to preserve the dam, the powerhouse and penstock tunnel. The penstock tunnel delivers water from the river to the powerhouse, aka the hydroelectric plant.

Sho-Me is also petitioning the Missouri State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) to include the penstock tunnel and powerhouse as historic sites. It has been determined that the dam itself is not eligible for historical designation.

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Camden County

This month, we'll present information about departments within the county that work well. We have excellent leadership, expert teams, and working processes in the Collector's and Treasurer's offices.

Teresa Murray, our County Collector manages the complex and varied revenue flows into (and sometimes out of) the county.

Kendra Hicks, our Treasurer, manages our bank accounts, pays the bills, and creates the report that shows where our dollars were spent.

Both women have years of experience in these departments. In their respective offices, they oversee the quiet, efficient flow of work that we depend on. They have no drama, and no desire to be in the spotlight. They focus on the responsibilities assigned to them by Missouri Statute, i.e., they do the work. We appreciate that.

The Treasurer & Collector are bonded. To hold office, they must pass a full background check and personal financial review by the bonding company.

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Under the current FERC application for decommissioning, Sho-Me would block off the entrance to the penstock tunnel just upstream from the dam. The dam itself would remain in place, as would the powerhouse. Energy generation has always been based on the flow of the river since construction in 1933, as opposed to a controlled flow through the dam as with Ameren at Bagnell dam.

Sho-Me will achieve about \$14 million in cost savings if they do not have to remove the dam and power plant. Residents are certainly in favor of the lake remaining as is. It's a win-win to leave the dam in place...but then there's the government approval process that includes the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of Natural Resources, and the Missouri Department of Conservation.

While Sho-Me's application respectfully acknowledges the preference for dam removal and river restoration by USFWS, DNR and MDC, they strongly advocate in favor of keeping the dam in place. They included survey results from residents who voiced concerns about the removal of habitat for migratory birds, waterfowl, and wildlife; loss of water access from docks; loss of recreational opportunities; concern for decrease in property values; and loss of opportunity to pass lake property down to family members, among other concerns. The full application and other information can be viewed at www.shomepower.com/about-sho-me/niangua-river-dam/

While Sho-Me's application flows through the approval process at FERC over the next year, residents around Lake Niangua remain concerned that there may be a directive for the dam to be removed. Sho-Me's application includes a list of residents identified as stakeholders. The list represents a group who met with Sho-Me during the development of the application. The strategy by locals seems to be to let the application flow through the process without bringing added awareness to it for fear a clamor may incite unwanted attention by the agencies that would prefer the dam be removed. Sho-Me's application is extremely well written, and the strategy seems sound.

Sho-Me and the Camden County Commission have signed a Memorandum of Agreement for the county to provide required regulatory oversight of their implementation of the Owner's Dam Safety Program and Inspection Operation and Maintenance Plan should the dam remain in place. This is at no cost or liability to the county. The Commission made a good decision to participate.

Lake Niangua is a shallow 360-acre lake with public access including a boat ramp and picnic area. The site for the tunnel dam was chosen because a 500-foot-long cave was found that extended through the ridge that separates the upper and lower bends of the river. The cave was modified so that the river flowed through it during dam construction in the early 1930's. Since completion, water no longer flows through the natural cave. Find Tunnel Dam Road on your GPS and take a drive down Hwy 54 and Hwy U. The view is stunning from the top of the hill looking down over the dam. We all hope they are successful with saving the dam.

To receive The Watchdawg Report free via email every month, contact me (Jennie) at Contact@watchdawgreport.com, or call 660-238-6514 and leave a message. All past issues are available at www.watchdawgreport.com. If you would like to see the print version continued, please ask about donating to help cover costs.

A particularly good job description for County Treasurer Kendra Hicks is on the county website, including a list of many of her team's responsibilities per state statute. To find the complete information at the county site, go to camdenmo.org, Click on Departments in the top menu, then choose Treasurer from the drop-down menu. I recommend you go to the page and read Kendra's own words. They clearly convey her knowledge, and her commitment to the community.

The County Treasurer's office works with all offices and departments across Camden County. County revenue in the form of taxes, fines, service fees, etc. are collected by the various departments, and delivered to the Treasurer's office. The delivery of funds is carried out via the hand-off of physical cash and checks, or via credit and debit card payments made into a designated account supported by matching documentation provided electronically or on paper.

For all money delivered to the Treasurer, the amount is matched to reports that accompany it.

- For the Collector, Recorder, Clerk, Sheriff's Department, Public Administrator and Prosecutor, monthly reports from specific bank accounts designated to those departments are used for verification.
- Daily electronic deposits come in from state departments including Sales Tax, CART Funds, fines, and Grant Reimbursements.
- Road & Bridge, Planning & Zoning, the Health Department, and the Wastewater Department deliver money and supporting documentation to the Treasurer daily.

If the cash or checks do not match the report, it is rejected and not accepted until everything balances.

The county's short-term investments are typically three-to-six-month Certificates of Deposit with local banks. Treasurer Kendra Hicks personally manages the origination and renewal of the CD's based on expected expenditures.

The county has five main checking accounts. They are:

- CAREs account – this is the famous ARPA money that is spent at the discretion of the County Commission.
- One Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) account is used for the Road & Bridge project on Dry Hollow Road.
- The second CDBG account is used for the Macks Creek Water District improvement,
- Main bank account – County operating bank account for day-to-day business. It's used to pay the bills that support the county business of serving residents. Employee payroll is an example.
- The Health Care Fund is used to pay third party insurance administrator Mutual Medical's premiums, and county employee claims associated with the county's self-insured status, e.g., doctor visits and pharmacy charges.

The Treasurer's Office has two employees who report to the elected Treasurer. The Chief Deputy and Deputy can receive funds, make deposits, and write checks. The Chief Deputy is trained to manage the county's CDs and other financials in the absence of the Treasurer. There is redundant responsibility across the team for all processes. Attention has been paid to provide continuity of service to county residents in any scenario. We love this type of management!

When I asked Collector Teresa Murray's office for input, they were happy to contribute with hope of clearing up misconceptions about their role in the tax process. The Collector's Office collects taxes due, and passes all monies collected on to either the County Treasurer or directly to associated entities such as The State of Missouri and school districts.

Those who work in the Collector's office are perpetually caught between taxpayers who feel their taxes are too high, and county entities that feel they are not receiving enough. Residents tend to first look to those who are sending the tax bills when they have a question. Instead, the more productive choice is to take your inquiries to those who impose the taxes. The County Assessor owns Real Estate and Personal Property assessments. The County Clerk's office is responsible for correctly loading levy rates into the Tax Collection System.

The Collector's Office also processes county revenue as follows:

- Lodging establishments send their lodging tax with a form showing the amount is 3% of gross receipts. For every form submitted, The Collector's office completes the calculation to send 2% of the amount paid to the County General Fund, and 98% is sent to the Tri-County Lodging Association.
- Merchant License fees – a complex process we may unpack in a future issue
- Railroad and Utility real estate and personal property taxes based on statements developed by the County Clerk.
- TIFS - individual agreements between developers/business owners and a government entity (city, county). After total taxes are paid, the Collector completes the work to calculate and distribute revenue and rebates per the agreement.
- Neighborhood Improvement Districts, typically established for updating infrastructure such as sewer or roads via a bond voted on by residents.

The Collector's Office sends out over 100,000 tax bills annually. The totals collected for Personal Property and Real Estate for the past three tax years were \$83.2M for 2022, \$79M for 2021 and \$77.9M for 2020.

The process to collect unpaid taxes includes reporting to the State Department of Revenue Personal-Property and conducting the annual Delinquent Real Estate Tax Sale (Extreme work involved). Currently, unpaid personal property and real estate taxes due cumulative for all years are \$3,121,073.82 and \$3,126,243.34, respectively. This is not from lack of effort. You would be amazed at some of the situations driving these amounts...perhaps that's a later article in The Watchdawg.

The Collector's team is focused on giving taxpayers easy access to tax information. In 2019 the county's online taxation system was modernized to make more information easily available to the public. From the Collector's web page, anyone can look up a tax record and see if it has been paid, what entities benefited from that specific tax bill, and any penalties, interest, adjustments, or tax sale fees levied against the tax record. Nice!

There is also a video that explains the correlation between turning in your personal property tax form by March 1st, paying your tax bill, and receiving your paid tax receipt so you can license your car. You can pay your taxes on-line or by phone and print your tax receipt. Go to camdenmo.org, Choose Departments at the top, and Collector in the drop-down menu. The Collector's office number is 573-346-4440, ext. 1200.