

# Davenport residents stuck with high cost of water, sewer



SHMUEL THALER/SENTINEL

The North Coast town of Davenport sits in the shadow of the now shuttered Cemex cement plant. With the plant now closed, residents' utility bills will climb, in some cases precipitously.

## With Cemex gone, households, businesses projected to pay hundreds more for utilities

*Davenport*

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Davenport resident Roger Knapp opened the Davenport Gallery late last year to showcase the work of nine local artists.

He knew the economy was at a low point, a hitch for any new business. But he didn't know that the neighboring cement plant would close and leave the burden of providing the town's utilities, long managed and largely paid for by plant owner Cemex, on the small North Coast community.

"We didn't see that coming when we set up the gallery," Knapp said. "It's a kick in the pants in times that are difficult already."

County Public Works officials, who are responsible for Davenport's utility systems, say residents and businesses will be paying hundreds if not thousands of dollars more each year for water and sewer service now that Cemex is out of the picture.

"A lot of people here are on fixed incomes. I'm just not sure where we're going to go with this," said longtime resident Noel Bock.

According to Public Works records, sewer rates could increase nearly 75 percent, bringing the flat residential fee close to \$2,500 annually. Water rates, the records show, could rise 10 percent, putting the flat household fee close to \$1,500 annually. The charges are levied on twice-a-year property tax bills.

For businesses, whose rates are determined by use, the hikes could be even more drastic.

"It's just one more thing," said Amy Hille, who manages the town's bakery, taqueria and market and has already seen business drop off with the recession and a loss of customers from the plant.

"This (rate issue) is just another relic of Davenport's past as a company town," she said.

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Amy Hille manages three businesses on Highway 1 in Davenport — all of which have seen a decline in business since the closing of the Cemex plant. She may also have to pay more for water and sewer.

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## DAVENPORT

Continued from A1

The community's water and sewer systems date back decades, built to accommodate the century-old cement operation and now shared by the plant and several hundred town residents.

Until Cemex announced its plans to permanently close the plant in January, the company was expected to pay half the cost of water

treatment, plus up to \$25,000 in water system improvements annually, according to the county, while covering half the cost of sewage treatment and all of sewage disposal.

The closure of the plant means the company's share falls on the community. Because of the town's small size, that tab can be spread across only so many people.

"Everything is complicated out there because of the relationship with Cemex," said Rachel Lather, a senior civil

engineer for the county.

The sewer rates are expected to increase more than the water rates, Lather said, because the cement plant, when in operation, could treat effluent during production. Now, the county has to find a way to handle the sewage.

Additionally, Lather noted, residents and businesses are already paying high water rates. A recent rate increase was supposed to pay for a new water treatment plant, but federal stimulus money covered that

bill, leaving the county with a surplus that can help offset what had been Cemex's share.

In a statement Wednesday, Cemex officials said they expect to sit down with county officials and find a way to make the transition as easy as possible.

Lather said the county is already working to find money to help pick up some of the community's expected burden.

"We're exploring all the different options," Lather said.