



## Interviews with Local Government Officials

# Gaining Public Support for Water Infrastructure Costs:

## Braman, Oklahoma

Jerry Johnston, Mayor

**Braman, Oklahoma**, population 250, is located off of Interstate 35 just south of the Kansas border. Since its establishment in 1898, Braman's economy has been based on oil and agriculture. A large tractor tire dealership located in town conducts \$25 million of business annually and demands reliable electrical and water service. Braman also abuts tribal land, where a casino may be built in the near future. The city is making infrastructure improvements in order to attract more small industrial operations, like the tire dealer, and to prepare to capitalize on the potential tourist traffic from the casino.

Braman has been able to undertake significant infrastructure improvements thanks to its reserve fund, which was established in the 1940s. At its peak, the fund was valued at \$300,000. The town has used its reserves to finance general infrastructure improvements and to provide the matching funds required by some grant programs.

In 1992, Braman applied for and received state funds that were available to communities with a significant population of low- to moderate-income residents. The grant was offered to communities wishing to develop community inventories, community profiles, and **capital improvement plans** (CIPs). Jerry Johnston, Mayor of Braman since 1983, garnered support for the program by promoting the grant as a chance for residents of Braman to take control of their future.


Residents participated in developing the community inventory, the community profile, and the CIP. In 1992, Braman completed its CIP, assisted by the sub-state planning district and a local engineer who offers his services at a discount to small towns. The CIP identified infrastructure goals for the town that must be completed to accomplish Braman's ultimate vision of attracting new businesses and potential casino-bound vacationers. The CIP identified three key areas as critical to realizing this vision: drinking water, electricity, and wastewater.

**Drinking Water:** In 1927, Braman installed sand-cast steel water mains sufficient to serve several thousand residents. These lines are in good condition and need no immediate improvements. Braman purchases its finished water from a neighboring town that draws from the Chickasaw River. When transmission lines began to leak in the 1980s, it was important to quickly fix the problem. The town replaced the leaking pipes without assistance, using \$35,000 from its reserve fund. The new lines are in good condition, and no further improvements are scheduled.



**Electricity:** Braman's electric company buys electricity at a wholesale rate from a neighboring community and re-sells it to its residents. This is the town's major source of revenue. After an ice storm in 2000, the town, in conjunction with the Federal Emergency Management Authority, invested over \$400,000 to improve its electrical infrastructure. Braman's electric company now reliably supplies both residential and commercial users.

**Wastewater:** Improvements to this final component of the CIP are still in progress. Several improvements are scheduled. In 1990, Braman received a grant to install a sewer lagoon, which is now in need of repair. A developer has expressed interest in building additional housing in Braman. To ensure that the sewer system can support these users, the town is conducting a sewer evaluation. Mayor Johnston believes that \$350,000 of improvements are necessary before the sewer system will be ready to



support new industry, new residents, and increased tourism. Braman is currently working on this grant.

Braman's **reserve fund** has been significantly spent down since the beginning of the infrastructure improvements. The town is no longer making deposits into the reserve. Residents are charged monthly for water, sewer, electrical, and solid waste services, and, even though rates have increased, rate revenue has not been sufficient to fund all improvements. Property taxes are devoted to the local school; thus, the municipality depends only on sales tax revenue - approximately \$37,000 annually - and income from the electric company to support infrastructure improvements.

The town has supplemented this revenue heavily with grant funding. Braman's Fire Chief has successfully obtained over \$150,000 in grants for the volunteer fire department. Total grants supporting the town's infrastructure improvement plan are at the 1.5 million dollar level, making Braman the town with the highest grant funding per capita in the state of Oklahoma.

Mayor Johnston reports that there is still **community support** for the CIP, even as rates have risen over the years. He believes residents accept rate increases because they were involved with the CIP process and understand its consequences. He credits the reserve fund, the foresight of past town planners, and the community's involvement in the CIP planning process for Braman's success.