

Not even Hoover Dam can hold fallout from visitors center

Rising 726 feet above the Colorado River, Hoover Dam has held back the water for nearly 60 years.

Baking in the sun, it is an architectural wonder that attracts hundreds of thousands of visitors each year. They come to gawk at its staggering scale and to take a tour deep into its belly.

And, perhaps, they also come to pay tribute to a time when government actually accomplished the things it set out to do.

All things considered, Hoover Dam probably will remain standing another few months as its embarrassingly costly visitors center crawls toward completion — even if the price being paid is enough to make taxpayers contemplate leaping over the side.

Factoring in overruns and interest payments, the cost of the visitor center and parking garage is expected to climb as high as \$120 million. Nevada Sens. Harry Reid and Richard Bryan have called for congressional hearings to discover why the bill for the visitor center will rival the \$165 million it cost to build the dam. Power rate payers will pick up the tab a little each month.

Granted, the dam was constructed way back when the government was well capable of building something taxpayers could see and touch. Hoover Dam may be the last federal project that actually was completed ahead of



John L.
Smith

schedule.

That fact alone makes it a landmark in American history. Although visitors will find a handsome tribute to the nearly 100 workers who perished during the dam's construction, the curious will discover no plaque attesting to the general efficacy of government.

For those driven to cynicism by modern realities, the dam makes a dandy wailing wall.

Reports of mismanagement, fraud and waste have been leaking out of the dam bureaucracy for months. Separating the genuine scandal from the simple paranoia and the ax-grinding won't be easy for Bureau of Reclamation Regional Director Lawrence Hancock. Then again, watching the visitor center rise amid a river of red ink can't be a treat, either.

This week, Hancock is scheduled to meet privately with employees in his stated attempt to gather facts and hear complaints. Unofficial allegations include misuse of public funds, missing inventory, abuse of work schedules

and the improper dumping of toxic substances.

According to a Feb. 21 memo from Hancock to Lower Colorado Dam Facilities Office Employees, the director's attention was drawn to the problem by lower Colorado Area Manager Blaine Hamann, who "was very concerned about these allegations of fraud, waste, and abuse, and in December, he requested that an investigation be conducted."

Hancock is considering using an independent investigation team to conduct in-depth interviews and review the allegations. Then a consulting team will review the information and follow up as needed.

"The charges that have been leveled are of a serious nature and must be taken seriously," Hancock wrote. "I have formed no conclusions regarding their validity at this point, however, I do believe that it is necessary to proceed with all deliberate speed assuring that everyone (employees and managers alike) are treated fairly and honestly. You have my personal assurance that any employee who chooses to participate in any phase of this investigation will not be penalized for their participation. The results of the investigation will be shared with you as appropriate."

It's a good thing because the process will be closely monitored. Some critics

of the bureau's management already are calling it an inside job and have questioned why the U.S. Inspector General has not been called in.

Contacted Tuesday, Hancock said the Inspector General's office remanded the fledgling investigation back to his unit until more information becomes available. Anonymous allegations are not easy to evaluate. Then again, government whistle-blowers often have been ostracized; historically, their fears of coming forward have been justified.

Disgruntled employees are a part of every workplace, but Hoover Dam is not just another federal office complex. It represents much more, and that is why an independent investigation is essential in maintaining the credibility of the bureau as the dam reaches its 60th birthday.

The federal government may have forgotten how to get things done in the six decades since an army of Depression-era wranglers braved 140-degree heat and other harsh conditions in Black Canyon to construct one of the nation's man-made wonders.

Unfortunately, the government hasn't forgotten how to spend your money.

Just be thankful that glorious dam already is built.

John L. Smith's column appears Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Sunday.