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'It's Detroit's water, period'

By TIM RICHARD

analysis

"It's our water. You don't own any of it. . . . But there has been a lack of understanding and a failure of communication, and we'll be glad to sit down with you and tell each other our problems."

That message, simultaneously conciliatory and absolute, was delivered to suburban city officials by Charles Scales Jr., new director of the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department.

Scales told mayors, councilmen and other officials at a regional meeting of the Michigan Municipal League that there was no possibility the suburbs could ever become part owners of the system.

"When you buy a car, you don't get stock in General Motors. You buy a kilowatt of electricity, but that doesn't give you stock in Detroit Edison," said Scales.

THE QUESTION arose last week when city and village officials held a seminar in the Detroit Yacht Club. A questioner asked Scales, a panelist on the topic of water, whether suburbanites were contributing, through their water and sewage treatment bills, to capital funding of improvements within Detroit's city limits.

The question went to the heart of the controversies over water rates between Detroit and the suburbs, and the perpetual 4-3 advantage Detroit has on the department's governing board.

Suburbanites have frequently suggested the water department become a regional facility with the "one person, one vote" principle applied to board representation.

A recent 39 per cent rate increase was adopted when the four Detroit

members outvoted the three suburban members.

Scales' answer left no room for doubt: There is no possibility the suburbs can buy their way into the system and become partners in Detroit's system, period.

SCALES ACKNOWLEDGED Detroiters and suburbanites alike had reason to be unhappy at the 39 per cent rate increase. But he defended it with the help of the other panelist, Dearborn Heights Mayor John Harris, newest suburban member of the water board.

Labor costs are rising, he said, pointing to union contracts, cost of living allowance improvements, social security tax increases, hospitalization and workers' compensation cost hikes.

The electricity bill from Detroit Edison Co. is \$400,000 monthly. Edison got a recent 15 per cent rate hike and is expecting another 18 per cent hike and will probably ask for still another 15 per cent hike, Scales said. Lawsuits arising from the Lake Huron intake tunnel explosion have been expensive, said Scales. The water department thought it would be exempt from such suits until the courts ruled otherwise.

ON THE CONCILIATORY side, Scales said many of the service contracts between Detroit and the suburbs are 30 years old. "There have been changes. We would like each of you to invite me to sit down with you. We can tell each other our problems. We will either reach agreement or at least delineate the issues."

He said the accounting firm of Arthur Andersen & Co. has been asked to make a computer model to aid the department in rate fixing.

A significant problem in the next four years, Scales said, will be raising \$400 million for water pollution control equipment. The department raises such capital through bond sales and through revenues generated by water sales.

HARRIS, APPOINTED by Detroit Mayor Coleman Young after Livonia Mayor Edward McNamara was fired, said water board differences are "based upon personalities, not Detroit versus the suburbs."

Harris called the board's representation "fair." He recalled that at one time Detroit and outer Wayne County had separate systems. "It was a good idea, but we (the suburbs) didn't know how to do it. When we found out how to do it, we found we couldn't afford it."

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