

Suburbs should be thankful, Detroit water director claims

By TIM RICHARD

Instead of "assaulting" Detroit by trying to take over control of its water department, suburbanites should appreciate the "generosity and good will" of the city for selling pure, clean water at low rates. That was the message of Charles Scales Jr., director of Detroit's water and sewer department, as he testified against three bills by State Rep. John Bennett (D-Redford) to curb Detroit's power over the water it sells to 95 suburban communities.

The hearing was conducted Monday by the house city government committee. Only Scales and two suburban mayors testified during the two-hour hearing.

"NO OWNER would willing contract away his ownership," said Scales, opposing Bennett's House Bill 5463, aimed at cutting Mayor Coleman Young's total power over the water board.

"The City of Detroit owns this water system and alone is responsible for its debt," Scales said, adding that Detroiters would have thought twice before selling water to the suburbs "if they had any idea there would be a suburban attempt to take control."

At present, the water board consists of

seven appointees of the mayor, three are suburbanites. Bennett's bill would continue to let Young appoint four Detroit members but would provide for four suburban members appointed by suburban officials and a ninth member picked by the other eight.

CLAWSON MAYOR Charles F. Palmer said the present system allows suburban members to be removed "at the whim of an individual," a reference to Young's 1973 removal of Livonia Mayor Edward McNamara from the water board.

Palmer said suburbanites should be allowed to pick their water board members through the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments.

Allen Park Mayor Frank J. Lada charged Detroit had shown a lack of good faith in its dealings and supported the proposed weakening of Young's grip on the water board.

But Rep. Dennis Hertel (D-Detroit), the lone Detroitite on the nine-member house committee, hammered away at Scales' charges. Hertel alone pleaded as full faith and credit behind water department bonds.

WOULD THE SUBURBS want to take over underwriting water department bonds? Hertel asked Lada.

"It'd be a fool if I said yes," replied the Allen Park mayor, one of the leading critics of water department operations. Scales, supported by Hertel, said that while suburbanites had constantly demanded audits and other information about how Detroit set its water rates, the suburbs had failed to provide Detroit information about the retail prices they charged their own residents.

In reply, Lada said "I'd welcome" letting the proposed new nine-member water board set rates that suburban cities and townships could charge their customers.

SCALES HAD these replies to Bennett's other bill affecting the water department.

"HB 5463's requirement of an independent

audit. Detroit by charter has an auditor, it uses state accepted accounting procedures, the state auditor general who would support the external auditor under Bennett's bill," he said.

"HB 5463's requirement of public hearings. The water board recently instituted the practice of holding a public hearing over proposed rate increases and the bill is unnecessary. The time requirements imposed in the bill are so great that the water board would be robbed of flexibility in adjusting to changing economic conditions, such as rising fuel prices."

"HB 5464's requirement that water be sold at cost. Detroit gets an eight per cent return on investment; that is plowed back into capital improvements and suburban customers are, in effect, already getting water at cost."

On one point, Scales got an argument from a committee member. Rep. Jeffrey Padden (D-Wyandotte) said the constitution and laws give the state auditor general authority to conduct or order an audit of any subdivision of the state—a definition that traditionally has included cities.

THE HEARING was attended by Chairman Michael Griffin (D-Jackson), Reps. Hertel, Padden, Ruth McNamee (R-Birmingham), Thomas Holcomb (D-Lansing) and DeForest Strang (R-Sburgut). Missing were Reps. John Markes (D-Livonia), W.V. Brotherton (R-Farmington) and Roy Smith (R-Plymouth), as well as Rep. Bennett, who is not a member of the committee. Bennett said he would attend the April 5 Livonia hearing.

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Suburban water hearings set

The city government committee of the state house of representatives will hold two suburban hearings on bills of Rep. John Bennett to curb the power of the Detroit water and sewer department.

Monday, April 5 at 10 a.m. in the senior citizens building, Farmington Road at Five Mile, Livonia.

Monday, April 12 at 10 a.m. in the Oakland County Board of Commissioners auditorium, 1200 N. Telegraph, Pontiac. No hearing will be held in Troy, as announced earlier.

Rep. Michael Griffin (D-Jackson) is chairman.

Persons wishing to testify should fill out a card available from a committee clerk the morning of the hearing. Legislative committee conducting public hearings commonly give public officials first opportunity to speak but otherwise follow a "first come, first heard" policy.

Charles Scales Jr., director of the Detroit water and sewer department, testified at the March 29 hearing and told the Observer & Eccentric he would not attend the suburban hearings even to rebut opposing points of view.

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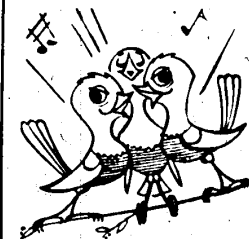
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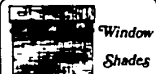


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