

# Suburbs can pay for, but not control, sewers

By TIM RICHARD

**Frustration!**  
Suburban officials used the word often in meetings last week as they found their federal aid for sewer construction off.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is refusing to release federal funds for sewers in West Bloomfield and Avon townships, along with a dozen other local units, while it takes the City of Detroit to court for sewer improvements in its Jefferson Avenue sewage treatment plant.

Those townships and more than 70 other cities, townships and villages in southeast Michigan buy sewerage treatment services from Detroit.

"It's frustrating," said West Bloomfield Supervisor John Doherty after a two-hour session Wednesday with EPA regional administrator George Alexander. "We can't do anything but pay. We have no control over the root problem."

Doherty referred to the probability that governmental customers face wholesale price increases of 200 to 300

per cent to help pay for improvements in Detroit's treatment plant. (The actual retail percentage increase to the homeowner, however, is expected to be less than that.)

**MEANWHILE,** Oakland County Drain Commissioner George Kuhn, well known for his frequent political battles with Detroit, was preparing his own move to get an outside investigation of, and regional control over, Detroit's water and sewer department.

Kuhn is preparing to intervene in the case of EPA vs. Detroit—on the side of the EPA. As drain commissioner, Kuhn is county agent for the Southeastern Oakland County Sanitary District as well as for the townships of West Bloomfield, Avon and Waterford.

(Kuhn also sought approval Thursday from the Oakland County Board of Commissioners to represent the Evergreen-Farmington and the Clinton-Oakland sewage disposal districts, but suffered a mild rebuff when Republicans loyal to County Execu-

tive Daniel T. Murphy sent the proposal to Detroit for consultation.)

**KUHN AND DEPUTY** Drain Commissioner Robert Fredericks, an attorney, could ask for any one of a number of options to "get the whole issue straightened out."

"Ask the federal district court to put the Detroit system into a receivership."

"Seek a court order for, and legislative approval of, a Southeastern Michigan Wastewater Treatment Authority to replace the Detroit-run department as manager."

"The Detroit plant is mismanaged and deteriorating," said Kuhn. "It's operating at only 50 per cent of capacity."

"It's a series of horror stories: Their purchasing policies—it takes three months to get anything; their personnel—they have to work through Detroit's civil service, and they can't get good help; their training programs—they just don't have trained persons to operate the plant."

"Why tack on \$200 million (the amount estimated to improve the Jef-

ferson plant to EPA specifications) when that plant is operating at only 50 per cent of capacity?"

"What's the solution? Do you just pour in more money? We're not opposed to more money, but that doesn't correct the management problems."

**IN DOLLAR** terms, it will cost \$200 million to correct the Detroit plant's problems, with the federal government providing \$150 million and the city and its customers \$50 million.

Also at stake are sewer projects in West Bloomfield worth \$20 million (\$6 million federal share) and in Avon worth \$12 million (\$4 million-plus federal share).

Michael Glusac, executive director of the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments (SEMCOG), which hosted the meeting with the EPA's Alexander, said the big question is not sewerage rates "but the future growth and economic development of southeast Michigan."

Detroit has until Sept. 30 to get its plant in order. After that, federal funds destined for sewer work in Mich-

igan will go to other states, said Alexander.

Asked by West Bloomfield's Doherty if it wouldn't be the lesser of two evils to advance the suburb's sewer funds so that it would cease polluting local lakes, Alexander replied: "From an environmental standpoint, that argument carries a lot of weight. But from a legal standpoint, it doesn't carry much weight. I can't sign off those grants or I'll go to jail, and I don't want to go to jail."

**KUHN'S AND** Fredericks' tactic of intervening on the side of the government could have other legal implications.

Kuhn suspects Detroit Mayor Coleman Young may seek to have suburban customers drawn into litigation as co-defendants with the city in the situation, the suburbs would be paying whatever fines were levied on the city and take a back seat to settling whatever consent decree is negotiated by EPA and Detroit.

On the other hand, by intervening on the side of EPA, Kuhn would become a co-plaintiff, perhaps making suburbs "being" fixed-for "mismanagement" of the sewerage plant, and be in a position to investigate aggressively the mismanagement and management of the sewerage

## System serves region

### 3 water board reforms talked up

Several plans are afoot by which suburban customers of Detroit's water and sewer department could have a voice in the management and rate-setting procedures they have been complaining about for years.

The department is governed by a seven-member board—four Detroiters

and three suburbanites—all appointed by Mayor Coleman Young and all removable by him, with no fixed term of office.

In such a setting, the board members have the status of administrative political appointees.

At present, the board is down to

five members, two suburbanites having quit with biases at the administration.

**ONE LEGISLATIVE** plan for restructuring has been reported out of a State House of Representatives committee in Lansing.

The work of State Rep. John Bennett (D-Detroit), it would set up a nine-member water board with five appointed and removable by the mayor and four appointed by an "assembly of governments" of suburban customers.

Such a plan passed the house last year but died in the senate. Bennett says it has a better chance this year.

**A SECOND** plan is being advanced by Oakland County Drain Commissioner George Kuhn in the midst of a political-court fight over improvements to Detroit's sewage treatment plant.

He advocates a "Southeastern Michigan Wastewater Treatment Authority," controlled by a governing board representing each municipality on a one-man, one-vote basis. The governing body of each municipality would appoint its representative to this board.

If Bennett is having a hard time getting his rather modest change through the legislature, the chances of Kuhn's plan being passed are far more remote.

**FINALLY,** the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments, plodding laboriously through a maze of committees and public meetings, is listing dozens of different ways to manage water quality in the seven-county region.

One contender would be a two-tiered arrangement, with SEMCOG appointing a regional Water Quality Board to do regional planning and monitoring of waste disposal, and with local authorities continuing to operate their own systems.

Still another possibility on SEMCOG's list would be a single planning and operating authority. No one is touting it politically, but the plan not far from what Kuhn is advocating—except for one important detail.

Kuhn assigns SEMCOG no role. Pro-SEMCOG people see that organization as the only one with the structure, experience and outlook to manage it.

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## Area dentists head state group

Three Oakland County dentists have been elected officers of the 4,400-member Michigan Dental Association (MDA).

Dr. James R. Lyons of Lathrup Village is the new president; Dr. James V. Barone of West Bloomfield, president-elect; and Dr. William Travis of Birmingham, vice-president.

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