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Water board curbs voted in house

With strong suburban support, the Michigan House of Representatives has passed and sent to the senate a pair of bills designed to curb the powers of the board that governs the Detroit water and sewer department.

The bills, written by Rep. John Bennett (D-Redford) and co-sponsored by Rep. Sal Rocca (D-Sterling Heights), are aimed at giving suburban customers of the Detroit system a voice in operating the department, requiring public hearings prior to rate increases and mandating an annual, independent audit.

All Observer & Eccentric area representatives supported both bills with two exceptions. Rep. James Delebaugh (R-Birmingham) opposed the bill reorganizing the water board, and Rep. Mel Larsen (R-Oxford) was absent with leave.

THE BILLS were opposed by many Detroit legislators as well as an assortment of conservative Republicans from small cities outside.

HB 4018, approved 70-27 on June 8, would expand the Detroit water board from seven members to nine, with five appointed by the mayor of Detroit and four selected by suburban communities who buy Detroit water and sewer services.

Presently, all seven members are appointed by the mayor and may be removed by him.

"The four non-Detroit members would be elected by an assembly of local units of government served by the system," said Bennett. "Each community would have one assembly vote for each 10,000 population, with every community entitled to at least one vote."

"Suburban people pay an enormous share of the costs of the department, and the department has benefitted from both state and federal funds. The Detroit water department can no longer be considered the private domain of the City of Detroit."

THE SECOND bill, HB 4017, approved

ed 99-39 the same day, would require public hearings on proposed rate increases at least 120 days before they are to go into effect.

"Realistically," said Bennett, "testimony at the public hearings may not stop a rate increase from going into effect, but the public hearings would give non-Detroit customers input into the rate-setting process and bring the weight of popular opinion into force against those who set the rates."

An independent audit would be conducted by a certified public accountant selected by the state auditor general. At present, the city audits its own books.

Both bills amend the 1909 Home Rule Cities Act.

How the bills will fare in the senate is another matter. Bennett expects senate leaders may hold them up in order to bargain for house passage of legislation the senate wants.

OPPONENTS made these arguments:

•The water board is only an advisory body, and final rate making authority rests with Detroit's elected council.

•The bills attack the principle of home rule and in effect amend Detroit's city charter.

•The bill might be construed to require transfer of control and assets of Detroit to a regional body, and there is a question of whether Detroit should be compensated.

•On the other hand, some lawmakers say the bill failed to go far enough and should have given a majority of water board votes to the customers.

First steamboat

The Walk-in-the-Water, first steamboat on the Detroit River, could carry 100 passengers. It traveled between Detroit and Buffalo from 1818-1821. Rough weather caused her to run aground.

Thursday, June 16, 1977

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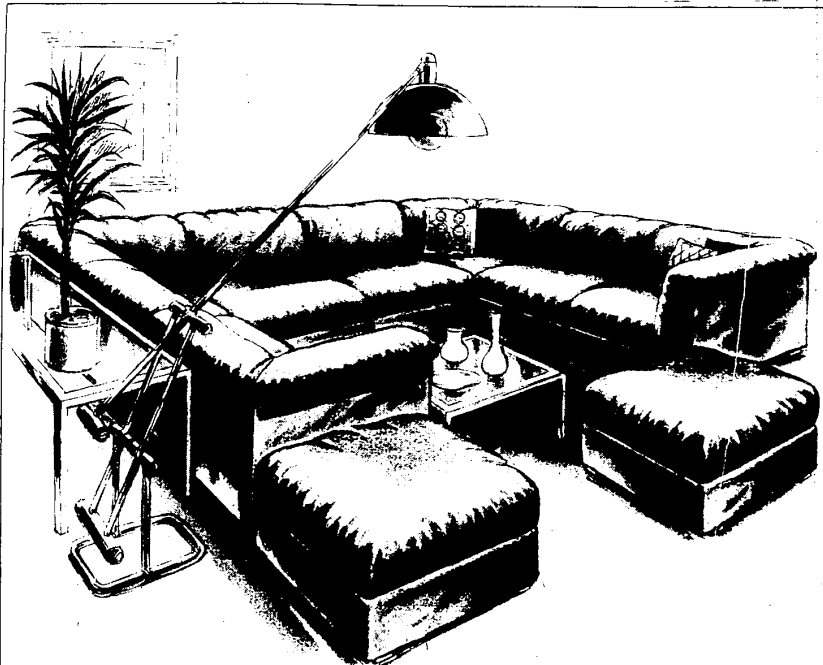


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