

Suburbs win on sewer rates

By MICHAEL MATUSZEWSKI

Suburban residents no longer will be paying more in sewage treatment rates than Detroiters.

Three specialists appointed by U.S. District Court Judge John Feikens found that Detroit overcharges its suburban sewage treatment customers. They also recommended the overpayments be credited back to the customers.

Between \$4 million and \$8 million could be credited back to the customers, estimated George W. Kuhn, Oakland County drain commissioner.

"WE'VE WON A lot of major points," Kuhn said. "It proves that we haven't sat back. We haven't let Detroit kick us down the drain."

Detroit's 78 suburban customers won

a major victory in the finding that Detroit's rate structure was discriminatory.

Until now, the Detroit Water and Sewer Board had determined suburban sewage rates under a system known as "utility style." In practice, it means one rate for suburban customers and another, lower rate for City of Detroit customers.

Under "utility style" pricing, the suburban rate was determined by adding a seven per cent profit-type differential to the cost of sewage treatment.

However, the court found that the rate structure was unfair by its own nature. Instead, it found that the Detroit sewage treatment facility had been funded by a combination of city, state and federal taxes and was therefore not the exclusive property of the City of Detroit.

THE COURT-APPOINTED masters — University of Michigan Prof. Edward H. Cooper, U-M engineering Prof. Jonathan W. Bulley and David V. Ragon, dean of U-M's College of Engineering — also found that the city had overestimated the costs of treatment plant maintenance and construction. The inflated estimates, according to their report, led to cash surpluses.

Kuhn estimated that the water board had estimates of at least \$10 million.

John Kanters, director of Detroit's Water and Sewerage Department, said only that there was a surplus of "several million dollars." The surplus, he added, would evaporate once the city began construction of its new sewage treatment facility.

ANOTHER MAJOR SUBURBAN

group of experts.

The suburban customers, in a consent order signed last September, asked the court to add more suburban representatives to the Detroit-dominated water board.

Feikens' panel, however, declined to make any recommendation in that area, saying it was not part of their responsibility.

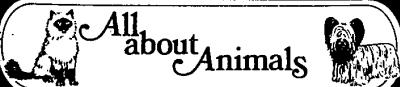
Kuhn said he expected Feikens to rule only on matters regarding Detroit's rate structure, leaving complaints about suburban water board representation in the air for the time being.

Before the report becomes a court order, Feikens must review it, and all parties to the suit will have 10 days to file objections. Then Feikens must decide to accept or reject the panel's findings.



Super setter

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