

# Sewage plant suit nears decision

By MICHAEL MATUSEWSKI and TIM RICHARD

Suburban officials want more say in the operations of the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department, which serves most southeastern Michigan communities.

Detroit officials want to retain control of the department.

The United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) wants Detroit to stop dumping essentially untreated waste into the Detroit River.

THE LINES were drawn long before U.S. District Judge John Feikens ordered an impartial assessment of the Detroit's massive Jefferson Avenue sewage treatment plant. The report was prepared by a court-appointed monitor, University of Michigan engineering professor Jonathan Bulkley, and it did little to change those lines.

The Detroit treatment facility is the subject of a 1½-year-long suit filed by the EPA.

Bulkley's report is highly critical of the management of the 600-person department.

Bulkley said the treatment facility was poorly staffed, lacks coordination between its many consultants, lacks an adequate training program and does not have the authority to purchase replacement parts necessary to keep the plant fully operating.

Judge Feikens met privately last week with attorneys and officials involved in the case. He is expected to make some decision on the future management of the treatment facility within two weeks.

The federal judge's choices include: 1) handing the plant over to the Army Corps of Engineers, 2) appointing a new supervisor and 3) giving the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department more time to improve the situation.

Bulkley indicated that the water department, through a series of emergency procedures, appeared to meet federal pollution limits.

SUBURBAN OFFICIALS would like to see the plant under new management.

"A change in management is vital, or six to eight months from now we'll be back in court trying to solve the same problems," said Oakland County Drain Commissioner George Kuhn, who has been involved in the case since its inception.

"The report," he said, "confirms many of the deplorable conditions that

have existed at the plant for years. "Only one-third of the sewage is being properly treated. The remainder is receiving only minimal treatment. I doubt if significant improvement can be made to clear up these problems," the Oakland drain commissioner said. "There must be a change in the day-to-day management if Detroit is to extricate itself from the long-standing problems," Kuhn added.

WHILE BULKLEY'S report suggests a change in management, others favor changes in the water department's policy making board.

State Rep. John Bennett (D-Redford), who has also followed the operations of the Detroit water department for many years, said he will again introduce his perennial bill to increase suburban representation on the Detroit water board and allow suburban customers to pick their own representatives.

The water board presently is composed of seven members—four Detroiters and three suburbanites. All are appointed by Detroit Mayor Coleman Young.

Bennett's bill would create a new nine-member board, which would give Detroit five seats and the suburbs four.

This bill was passed twice by the Michigan house but was stopped in the State Senate. "Young sent his henchmen up to kill the bill at the 11th hour," Bennett said.

ANOTHER REGIONAL group, the Metropolitan Fund, opposes the idea of the federal government taking over Detroit's treatment facility.

Metropolitan Fund Acting President Don Shelton also favors a restructured water board. "The best of all worlds would be an elected regional mechanism," he said.

But, like Bulkley's report, Shelton criticized some of the water department's long-standing practices.

"In terms of a regional perspective," he said, "(Detroit's) residency rules don't make any sense." All City of Detroit employees are required to live in the city.

"I have a bigger problem with their residency rule than with the composition of their board," Shelton said.

SOME PERSONS, in turn, have suggested that the waste water treatment facility be operated by the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments (SEMCOG).

SEMCOG officials, however, are cool to that idea.

"There's not any real chance of that," said Edward Hustoles, manager of environmental projects for the re-

gional agency. "We're not an operating agency in the way that SEMTA (Southeastern Michigan Transportation Authority) and the Army Corps of Engineers are," he said.

"I'm not sure," he added, "that the plant could technically operate any better under the control of the Army Corps, SEMCOG or anyone."

Hustoles said that the treatment plant's performance in late November and early December showed that pollution standards could be met.

He said that Detroit, like many other sewage treatment plants across the country, has been caught in the position of having too few qualified technicians to meet ever-stricter pollution guidelines with technology that has not been totally mastered and developed.

WHILE MANY have criticized the water department's top management and are hoping that Judge Feikens seizes the plant, Hustoles pointed to other deficiencies.

"I'm not sure that top management is where the problems are," Hustoles said, adding that there are not enough people to supervise the plant's day-to-day operations.

"At the middle supervisory levels there are vacancies right across the board."

"You can have the best top management in the world, but if you don't have the troops and the captains to tackle the problems day-in and day-out, nothing's going to happen," he said.

Bulkley, however, cited the city of

Detroit for a poor on-the-job training program and for not taking advantage of available training programs. Both actions, the court-appointed monitor said, would have helped ease the personnel crunch at the treatment plant.

EVEN THOUGH the report is highly critical, Detroit Water Department Director John Kanters sifted through the nearly 200 findings and pointed to a number of bright spots.

"Let's not play games and say it's a whitewash report," Kanters began, "It's quite critical."

"It points out some weaknesses and it was an honest appraisal," he said.

Kanters said he agreed with a number of Bulkley's findings, especially in the areas of hiring, training and purchasing. But, he said, changes are being made to improve the Jefferson Avenue plant's performance.

He said the department was hiring non-Detroiters for critical engineering and technical positions. "Because the city has not rescinded its residency requirement, though, the non-Detroiters are being hired on a provisional basis."

Further, he added, emergency purchasing procedures were enacted. Those are scheduled to elapse, however, and he could not say if they would be continued.

A new ordinance allowing the water department to do its own purchasing will be considered by the Detroit City Council in the near future, he said.

Kanters said he could not predict what action Judge Feikens would take.

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