

Suburbs squawk as Detroit weighs sewer charges

By TIM RICHARD

Businessmen and two Detroit councilmen joined suburban politicians recently in resisting major increases in Detroit's sewer treatment rates.

The Detroit City Council deadlocked 3-3 last Wednesday on proposed sewer rate hikes that ranged from 31 percent for Detroit homeowners to 38 percent for most western suburbanites and to 400 percent for some industries.

But the council may reconsider the issue Sept. 12, when all nine Detroit council members are due back from summer recess. Three council members were absent from last week's special meeting.

A RECONSIDERATION became possible when U.S. District Judge John Peikens late last week gave Detroit another 60 days — till Nov. 1 — to report the proposed rate increases to his court. Peikens is presiding over a consent order which Detroit must follow to upgrade its sewer treatment plant and meet federal anti-pollution guidelines.

Detroit Mayor Coleman Young requested the extra time so that he, as the court-appointed special administrator of the sewerage plant, could avoid imposing the rate increases unilaterally. The new treatment rates, to be effective Jan. 1, would remain in effect through June 30, 1981.

DETROIT, which offers retail sewer service to its own property owners and wholesale service to about 70 outlying communities with 3.2 million residents, is under federal court orders to improve the quantity and quality of wastewater treatment. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency calls the city's plant the single worst polluter of Lake Erie.



GEORGE KUHN
"Increasingly unilateral decisions."

The rate increases, according to the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD), are needed to pay increased operating costs for workers and supplies.

Arguments at an Aug. 29 public hearing revolved around 1) whether suburban customers were being forced to pay for the city's "mismanagement" of its plant and 2) whether businesses were being hit too hard.

A constant theme was the "frustration" suburban officials and business groups felt at dealing with the city staff and its consultants.

Siding with the suburban officials and businessmen were Detroit Councilmen David Eberhard and Jack Kelley. (Councilman Kenneth V. Cockrel, a self-

proclaimed Marxist, also voted against the rate increases for other reasons.) What Detroit and U.S. District Judge John Peikens will do next is uncertain.

GEORGE KUHN, Oakland County drain commissioner, said suburban customers had such good relations with the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department prior to the mid-1970s that "we almost didn't need a contract."

"Since the mid-70s, however, Detroit has operated increasingly on the basis of unilateral decisions with very short notice to, and limited opportunity for input from, its various contractual customers."

Sewerage rates, Kuhn complained, have increased more than 1,000 percent since 1959 and 430 percent since 1975. The drain commissioner, who administers several Oakland projects, said he has received inadequate financial information from the city, and he suggested that any surplus for the fiscal year that ended June 30 result in a rate cut rather than be distributed as a rebate, as in the past.

One specific rate-making procedure drew Kuhn's ire: that common costs should be shared by city and suburban customers equally, on the basis of flow. Because of reports of mismanagement in the plant, Kuhn proposed that the city alone bear cost increases "which can be shown to be the result of this kind of management failure."

ONE OF KUHN'S charges was warmly disputed by John Kanter, director of the DWSD.

"We have met innumerable times with the representatives of Wayne, Oakland and Macomb counties, industry and the laundry business. The list of meetings would take up two pages," said Kanter. "We've made a tremendous effort to keep them informed."

To Kuhn's suggestion that a fiscal surplus result in a rate cut, Kanter responded, "I will take up Mr. Kuhn on sharing the surplus if he will consider sharing a deficit. I have only preliminary numbers, but it appears we ran a minor deficit" in the fiscal year which ended June 30.

PHILIP G. TANNIAN, former Detroit police commissioner and attorney for industrial and commercial laundries, said the proposed rates would have a heavy impact on that industry, but that the rate-making process was rushed.

"When you're handed the fifth draft of an ordinance at 9 a.m. and told it will be passed at 2:30 that afternoon, you do not have time to react," said Tannian, blaming EPA dawdling rather than the city for the rush to draft new sewer treatment rates.

The new rates, if and when enacted, would raise total DWSD revenue to more than \$120 million a year. Three-fourths of the money would be for operating costs rather than for capital improvements, which the federal and state governments are funding.



PHILIP TANNIAN
"No time to react."

David McKeen, of the Greater Detroit Chamber of Commerce, said it was a "frustrating experience" to deal not only with the city but its rate-making consultant, Camp Dresser & McKee.

He called their responses for information "incomplete and inadequate," adding: "I can only say that we've been stonewalled."

McKeen charged the proposed rates would have a "devastating effect on business," citing food, commercial laundry and a paper company.

THE SAME charge was made by Detroit Councilman Kelley, citing the effect on Scott Paper Co., Awrey Bakery, Chrysler Corp. and Stroh Brewery.

"The costs are staggering," Kelley roared.

Councilman Eberhard took a political line. "If we pass these rates, the suburbs will put pressure on the Michigan Legislature such as you've never seen to take it (the sewerage treatment plant) away from the city."

Council President Henderson said, "I'm glad Mr. Eberhard pointed out it's our system."

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