

Detroit water board foes pledge power play

By TIM RICHARD

Oakland County political leaders are launching a drive to regionalize control of the Detroit Water and Sewer Department (DWSD), from which three million persons in nearly 100 outlying communities buy services.

Because the Michigan Legislature is unlikely to enact reform, the move will probably require an initiative petition drive and a ballot vote, Oakland County Drain Commissioner George Kuhn told an assembly of local officials.

State Rep. Rick Fessler, R-West Bloomfield, added, "I'm researching metropolitan water and sewer authorities throughout the country" for ideas on reorganization. "We'll take the best parts of the existing systems."

THE NEW DRIVE started in the wake of Detroit's efforts to raise sewage treatment rates 31 to 400 percent and to pass new ordinances controlling industrial wastes that may go into the sewage system.

"I hate to be 'down' on Detroit," said Kuhn, "but we're paying a very high price for not getting service."

His chief complaints are: 1) The De-

troit water board is controlled entirely by appointees of Mayor Coleman Young, and outer communities have no right to appoint board members; 2) the sewage treatment plant has been plagued by a federal government lawsuit and massive administrative problems, but the city won't hire non-residents who might be able to solve the problems; 3) the costs of mismanagement are passed on to customers.

The DWSD sells water and sewer services retail to its own residents and businesses. It sells water wholesale to about 100 outer communities and sewage treatment service to about 70.

FESSLER, a two-term veteran of the legislature, said chances of a legislative reform are small, even though Oakland County has 11 of 110 house seats and four of 38 senate seats.

"Even when we had the Bennett bills, we had representatives from Oakland County not voting for them," said Fessler. He referred to bills sponsored by Rep. John Bennett, D-Redford. The bills would have assured suburban representation on the water board and required annual outside audits of the DWSD.

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Another problem, said Fessler, is that a Detroit is chairman of a key committee through which any reform legislation must pass.

Kuhn and Fessler were uncertain how a petition drive and ballot proposal would operate. Would the entire state vote on it or just the customer counties in southeast Michigan? How would outstate voters react to a proposal affecting only the southeastern one-third of the state? How would they get petition signatures from the re-

quired 25 counties for a proposal affecting only a half-dozen?

DETROIT'S WATER and sewer system is financed mainly from federal aid, state aid and bonds financed by user charges. It uses virtually no city tax funds.

Nevertheless, Detroit political leaders made it clear that they view the system as theirs and will never agree to sharing control and jobs. A knock-down, drag-out battle is certain.

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It would be a familiar battlefield for Kuhn, who as mayor of Berkley in the 1960s and later as a state senator was in center ring of battles against Detroit's taxing the incomes of non-residents who work there.

So far there are no petition forms ready. Representatives of local governments at last week's meeting gave Kuhn a show of hands telling him to instruct his legal staff to investigate the petition process. Kuhn, in turn, told them to "discuss thoroughly" the problem with their local governments.

IN OTHER developments at the meeting:

Kuhn warned the local leaders that their customers have yet to feel the impact of the \$2.50 per 1,000 cubic feet sewage treatment rate which went into effect July 1. The rate is scheduled to increase to \$2.90 Jan. 1.

William Hampton, drain commission attorney, said Macomb County is fighting a plan whereby it would assume the entire \$30 million cost of repairing a massive sewer collapse. Oakland and Wayne counties will join Detroit in resisting Macomb's efforts in court to spread the cost.

Deputy Drain Commissioner Robert Fredericks said complex new industrial cost recovery elements will be in the sewer rates as of Jan. 1, although the precise rates are still being negotiated. These surcharges will have a major impact on food processors, breweries, laundries and other heavy water users.

New sewage treatment rates were supposed to be passed by Detroit's city council by Sept. 1 so that the rates could go into effect Jan. 1. The council failed to pass the rates in a 3-3 vote with three members absent. But Hampton said the parties agreed in federal court to waive the 120-day notice of new rates and make it 60 days, which will the council until mid-October to pass new rates.

Detroit has had to pass ordinances controlling what kinds of effluents can be put into the sewage system. Fredericks advised local communities to pass the same ordinances. "Detroit has attempted to say its ordinances will have power throughout the service area. We say it's not binding outside Detroit, but you should pass your own ordinances."

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