

Water-sewer rate battle lingers as hike looms

By TOM LONERGAN

An interim order putting the city of Detroit's new sewer and water rates into effect as scheduled Jan. 1 could be signed this week by U.S. District Judge John Feikens.

However, the order won't prevent suburban communities and several industry groups from pursuing their protests against the new rates.

For western Wayne and south Oakland County homeowners, the new rates will hike water bills some 38 percent next year.

But for industrial users, the increases will be steeper. Besides rate hikes ranging from 158 percent to more than 400 percent, industries face one and maybe two sewer-use surcharges next year.

SINCE DEC. 7, attorneys representing Oakland, Macomb and Wayne counties and various businesses have been meeting with officials of the city of Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD) about rates and other issues.

According to Robert Fredericks, Oakland County deputy drain commissioner, "there's a variety of viewpoints" regarding what progress has been made at the meetings.

"I think some interim order will be entered (by Feikens) regardless of what comes of negotiations," Fredericks said last Friday.

Feikens may give the go-ahead to the rate hikes at a 9 a.m. Tuesday hearing in the federal courthouse in downtown Detroit. He may also have a three-man "masters panel" hear those issues the

attorneys fail to resolve.

FREDERICKS SAID those issues could include:

- Whether the DWSD budget for the next 18 months has been "overstated," as alleged by both suburban and industrial challengers. The new rates are expected to provide \$184 million for the sewer and water system through June 30, 1981.

- How great the flow of stormwater and sewage is into the Detroit sewage treatment plant. Metered suburbs, such as those in Oakland and western Wayne counties, say Detroit's projection of unmetered flow into the plant from the

city and nearby suburbs like Dearborn is underestimated. The metered suburbs say this results in higher bills.

- Whether Detroit gets free stormwater treatment for drainage from more than 22,000 acres of city of Detroit right-of-way.

- Whether surcharges, applied when industrial and commercial sewage exceeds certain strengths, will be based on levels determined by DWSD. The industries want the levels set higher than what DWSD has determined.

THE LATTER industry challenge, if upheld, could result in higher rates for residential customers of the Detroit

system. The treatment plant serves more than three million people in 76 metropolitan area communities.

Raising the pollutant levels would mean less revenue from industry, Fredericks said. "That revenue would be recovered at-large from all customers."

He said suburban representatives haven't agreed with industry on the surcharge levels "because it means we'll pay more."

In a court hearing last week, Feikens indicated he wouldn't grant one industry demand — that revenues from the new rates be held in escrow until the challenges are settled.

Feikens said he would "not impose any restrictions such as an escrow."

"We could do irreparable harm to this system . . ."

The masters panel to which Feikens could send the unresolved issues would be the same panel of three engineering-related specialists who studied the system's rate structure three years ago.

THAT STUDY resulted in rebates to suburban customers, because the masters found rates in 1977-78 produced excessive revenues.

Feikens has presided over the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) suit against the Detroit sewage treatment plant.

Beware of fur farm deals, eager beavers

Each year, according to Federal Trade Commission estimates, more than \$50 million is swindled out of Americans who fall prey to "get-rich-quick" schemes which may involve raising chinchillas or investing in fur farms.

Others fall victim to these rip-offs because of sheer gullibility, but, no matter how you slice it, they're still skinned in the end. Con artists realize that the holidays offers the perfect time to involve their victims in some hair-raising experiences.

For the person who has overspent his Christmas budget or is interested in a do-it-yourself holiday project, raising chinchillas at home may seem like the perfect way to make some fast, easy money to pay off those debts or "grow" a fur coat for a wife or sweetheart.

Here's what happens: A salesman may knock at your door or you may read an advertisement which relates glowingly the wonderful future in raising chinchillas at home.

What the salesman or the advertisement may not explain to you is that while chinchillas may be sturdy animals in their homeland — South America — when bred in damp basements, unheated garages, or hot attics, their death rate is quite high.

Quite simply, these "much-prized" rodents have difficulty surviving tem-

peratures which are in the 80s or below freezing. Furthermore, sometimes they eat their own expensive fur, and sometimes the females kill the males. Also, consider these points:

- Some cities ban the raising of chinchillas.

- Female chinchillas average two offspring per year.

- Average prices paid for pelts are about \$15 — claims that pelts bring \$80-\$100 are based on isolated sales.

REMEMBER, before you decide on presenting your spouse or close acquaintance with a "do-it-yourself" chinchilla coat for Christmas or arrange to go into business raising chinchillas in order to pay off debts or perhaps earn some extra money, get all the facts.

However, if after careful consideration you still decide that there is money to be made from raising chinchillas, before you buy a pair for breeding, learn to distinguish the male of the species from the female.

Otherwise, you could get swindled in the same way as others have when they fell for the glib spiel of a fast-talking con artist who convinced them they could make a fortune breeding and raising chinchillas and then sold the unsuspecting entrepreneur two of the same sex.

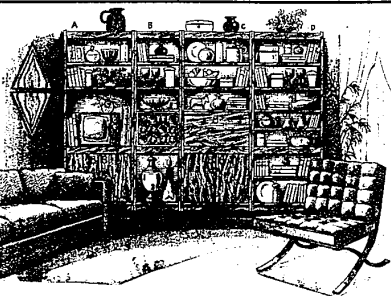
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