

For rate structure revamping

Judge insists on water watchdog

By TOM LONERGAN

Federal Judge John Feikens wasn't just thinking aloud recently when he suggested closer scrutiny for the Detroit water and sewerage system budget.

"I'm going to insist that there be a watchdog committee," Feikens said this week.

The chief U.S. District judge announced his intention Monday after successfully mediating a compromise on new sewage treatment rates for the next 18 months between city of Detroit Water and Sewerage Department officials, suburban customers and industrial users.

FEIKENS wouldn't say whom he would appoint to the watchdog committee. He plans Monday to get the views of city, suburban and industry lawyers who worked out the sewage rate compromise.

He also plans to meet soon with Mayor Coleman Young, whom he appointed special administrator of the city's sewage treatment plant last year, and with state and federal environmental officials.

"No one as far as I know has said, 'We have checked every last dollar in this new (sewage rate revenue) goal

'All of this rate making ought to be subject to a group that has interests that are not just consultants' interests.'
— Judge John Feikens

... and we find that all of it is necessary," Feikens said.

The compromise will reduce total revenue from the new rates by \$3.5 million to \$180.8 million, about a 2 percent decrease.

"All of this rate making ought to be subject to a group that has interests that are not just consultants' interests," Feikens said, adding:

"There isn't anyone here who can say that any one of these figures proposed by the rates consultant was subject to question."

THE RATES were proposed by Camp Dresser and McKee, a consulting firm hired by Detroit in compliance with a 1977 consent judgment reached between the city and federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). That agreement put the massive Detroit sewage treatment plant on a timetable to meet federal anti-pollution laws by 1983.

The treatment plant serves 3.2 mil-

lion people in more than 70 metropolitan area communities. According to DWSD, large rate increases in recent years have been necessary to bring the plant into compliance with federal clean water standards.

Consultants' fees in the DWSD budget have long been criticized as excessive by Oakland County Drain Commissioner George Kuhn.

Kuhn, who is leading a petition drive for regional control of the sewer and water system, welcomes Feikens' watchdog committee proposal.

"We've got to put a lid on the cost, and the consultant fees can't run rampant," said Kuhn, who estimates \$71 million was spent by DWSD on consultants between May 1977 and the end of 1978.

"I say today they've spent \$5 million to \$10 million more — that's what the watchdog committee's about."

DETROIT OFFICIALS questioned whether more "experts" were needed to determine rates and monitor DWSD's operation.

"The \$184 million (revenue need proposed by the consultant) has been subjected to more scrutiny than ever before," said Richard McClear, DWSD attorney.

"All challengers looked at (the rates) and, with very few exceptions, found no problem," McClear added.

But Phillip Fannian, former Detroit police commissioner who is attorney for area laundry companies, said, "We didn't do much more than scrape the surface of the budget issue."

Attorney William Hampton of Farmington Hills, who represented Oakland County in the negotiations, said DWSD must have better accounting procedures.

"Detroit has no method to compare actual ongoing expenditures with the budget," Hampton said.

According to Kuhn and Hampton, DWSD officials say their 1979 budget year may show a deficit, but they don't know yet.

"They're talking about a \$3.2 million deficit as of August," said Kuhn. "We don't believe it."

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