

Water board reform must wait

By Tim Richard
staff writer

The Tigers expect to be baseball champions this year. But for George Kuhn, Oakland County drain commissioner, reform of the Detroit Water Board will have to "wait 'til next year."

"The package will be introduced as Senate Bills 1, 2 and 3 on Jan. 1, 1985," Kuhn said last week. He asked the state Senate Local Government Committee to withhold action on the bills in the remainder of the brief fall session.

"We're back to square one," Kuhn said.

"Last year we had the votes," the suburban Republican official said. His voice trailed off, indicating that somewhere there had been an eroding of support.

BUT 1985 could be ideal for the bills, sponsored by Sen. Richard Fessler, R-West Bloomfield, supporters say. Reasons:

• Federal court last week began releasing to the media audio tapes, videotapes and transcripts involving Detroit Mayor Coleman Young and persons convicted in the Vista Disposal case. Vista was a private contractor removing sludge from the Detroit sewage treatment plant. "Everything that happens (with Vista) points up the need for

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— Sen. Patrick McCollough
D-Dearborn



George Kuhn
'Back to square one'

reform," said Fessler. "These bills are a positive step in correcting the abuses."

• Republicans believe they could gain control of the House in the Nov. 6 election for the first time in 18 years. "It is clearly within our grasp," according to Minority Leader J. Michael Busch, R-Saginaw. Democrats have had a 65-47 majority the past two years, and a black Detroit representative heads the House committee which would handle the package.

• The Senate committee wouldn't change (the Senate isn't up for election this year). There is no need to repeat the public hearings. The bills remain only to be voted out of committee and sent to the Senate floor.

DETROIT'S WATER and Sewerage Department serves about 100 suburban communities but is entirely under the control of Mayor Young. He appoints all seven water board members — four Detroiters and three suburbanites — and may remove them at will.

Fessler's bills would create an assembly of local governments based on

one vote per 10,000 population. The reconstituted water board would have a suburban majority of the suburbs' choosing.

Detroit officials vehemently oppose the bills, saying it's a white suburbanite plot to rob the city of one of its financial "winners."

In a series of four lengthy public hearings last summer, Kuhn and suburban officials argued that suburban customers are being overcharged by a mismanaged system in which they have no voice. "There will be less concentration of power in what I've proposed, less opportunity for abuse," Fessler said.

Kuhn said the Senate committee's public hearings won't have to be repeated next year, and that the committee can go ahead and report the bills out.

AT LEAST one suburban senator, however, has qualms. Patrick McCollough, D-Dearborn, also has one of the five votes on the Local Government Committee.

McCollough has some political problems because his district includes a corner of southwest Detroit and such suburbs as Garden City. His official position is that "I haven't made up my mind."

"The suburbs need a larger voice over a system which has great impact on their future," McCollough said in a Capitol corridor interview. "But I'm not sure taking it by legislative fiat is right."

"Ownership is a bundle of rights," said McCollough, emphasizing that Detroit is legal owner of the system, and

among those rights is governance. "If we passed these bills, I'm quite sure they (Detroit) would sue. We'd all spend a fortune on attorneys."

McCULLOUGH'S solution: The suburbs should negotiate with Detroit for better representation on the water board. "The bills are a good idea to keep pressure on the city to deal with the suburbs," he said.

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