

State debate: Who controls area water, sewage plants?

By TIM RICHARD
STAFF WRITER

Regional control of southeastern Michigan's water and sewerage system will be a campaign issue if not a state law in 1992.

"It's unnecessary, contrary to democratic theory, overturns legal agreements, and unjust because it expropriates Detroit's property," objected a Detroit official.

"It's an affront to Detroit, a home-rule city, and its people," added Dave Fisher, deputy director of the Detroit Water & Sewerage Department, which sells its services to more than 100 municipal neighbors in five counties.

But Bob Fredericks, deputy Oakland County drain commissioner, scoffed at the idea that Detroit "owns the system."

"These are public assets," Fredericks said of the water plants and sewage treatment plant. "There aren't any (Detroit) taxpayers funds in it. The customers put the money in. There is no Detroit equity in the system."

The exchange occurred Tuesday before state Sen. David Honigman's Local Government Committee. Detroit officials blasted "politics who harangue us" — a reference to Honigman's congressional candidacy.

Honigman, R-West Bloomfield, sponsored Senate Bill 936 requiring a multi-county assembly to elect

members of two boards — nine members to a water board, seven to a sewerage board.

"Really, in fact, Detroit controls the rates for the system," said Honigman, who sponsored the bill at the request of Oakland Drain Commissioner George Kuhn.

Honigman's bill was discussed a week too late to be voted on by the full Senate prior to its mid-June break. So he will try an unusual step — a "friendly discharge." In an unfriendly discharge, supporters of a bill seek to force it out of an unfriendly committee. But in this case, Honigman is seeking to

bypass a calendar rule.

Kuhn's 20-year battle with Detroit went over much familiar ground:

• Detroit Mayor Coleman Young appoints not only Detroit's four board members but three suburban members, too — and can fire them at will, though he has done it only once.

• Detroit denies information on whether suburban rates are high in order to subsidize bill-dodging by Detroit residents. The city also refuses to yield a copy of a contract with Detroit Edison Co. raising its

the price of electricity it buys 5 percent.

• Detroit loads ever-increasing general government costs into the water budget — \$831,000 for the mayor's office, \$760,000 for the council, \$200,000 for the city clerk, Fredericks said.

• Detroit issues 68 percent of its contracts without competitive bidding. "It's your own auditor who reported this," Honigman told Fisher.

But Detroit got support from one suburbanite — John Lamerato of Madison Heights. He called the Kuhn-Fredericks presentation "misinformation."

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