

Sparks fly over water department efficiency

BY KURT KUBAN
STAFF WRITER

Local residents and political leaders sparred over the future of the beleaguered Detroit Water and Sewerage Department at a raucous public hearing Tuesday in Royal Oak.

The hearing, the second of three sponsored by a state House of Representatives subcommittee, was held to obtain public opinion about House Bill 5788, which was introduced by State Rep. Leon Drolet (R-Macomb County). If approved, the bill would give suburban communities more representation on the water board that oversees the DWSD. Currently the water board has seven members, with four from Detroit, and one each from Oakland, Macomb and Wayne counties. The bill would create a board with 10 members, consisting of three from Oakland, and two members each from Macomb and Wayne counties, and Detroit. The final member would be selected by the governor.

The DWSD, which serves 4 million customers and is the nation's third-largest water and sewer provider, has come under fire in recent months on a number of issues, including mismanagement, lack of security at its facilities, and skyrocketing water bills. More than 75 percent of its customers live outside of Detroit.

People in the overflowing crowd at the Royal Oak library, which included many Detroit residents, had varying opinions about the pending legislation.

Marilynn Gosling, Oakland County's representative on the water board, said the DWSD

has been unfairly portrayed by the media in recent months. She said the water board is not biased against the suburbs.

"We are a very fair, non-partisan board," she said. State Rep. Bob Gosselin (R-Troy) said the current makeup of the water board amounts to "taxation without representation," because Detroit has more representation, despite the fact that the vast majority of water users live in the suburbs.

"The issue of fairness is what the people I represent are concerned about. Fairness is what

this bill addresses," said Gosselin, who also represents Rochester Hills.

Victor Mercado, the DWSD's new director, said the taxation analogy is off-base, because the department is "totally supported" by the fees it charges its customers.

Mercado said regionalizing the water board is an "unnecessary action," because the department has already begun implementing changes to increase efficiency, such as a restructuring of management.

"Yes, the water department

has had some inefficiencies in the past, but we are striving to get better under my leadership," he said. "The bill will just increase bureaucracy and result in higher costs for water service in Southeast Michigan."

Matt Pryor, the mayor of Troy, said suburban customers are having to foot most of the bill for improvements to the DWSD system, and should therefore have more say in the way the department operates.

"What we're saying in the suburbs is that we're not happy," Pryor said. "My com-

munity wants regional participation, because we pay part of the regional cost."

John Grace, a Rochester attorney, said he doesn't understand why there is such hostility directed toward the DWSD, which he believes provides a great service. He said the suburbs should be more cooperative and let the department sort out its problems.

"In my opinion, two words sum up the Detroit water department: Detroit delivers," he said. "Let's concentrate on the good of everyone, and let

this system work."

Gosling agreed, and pleaded with the members of the subcommittee to kill the legislation.

"Future wars will be fought over clean, drinkable water. Don't make this the first," she said.

The third and final subcommittee hearing is scheduled for 7 p.m. Oct. 24 in Detroit at the Northwest Activities Center, which is located at 18100 Meyers.

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FAMILIES

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program counselor, I can attest families are stretched to the limit," agreed CYF member Joan McGlinchey.

Even on those rare occasions when families are at home, often children and parents are on the phone, plugged into the computer or other activities, so they're still not together, she added. CYF was inspired by a story broadcast on MSNBC, about a city in New Jersey that spent a year planning a designated "Family Night." Schools, civic organizations, churches and synagogues all agreed to suspend activities for one night, to encourage families to stay at home and spend time together. "All community organizations worked together," Sommers said. "We'd like to put together a broad-based community committee to explore the idea."

CYF is looking for people from across the city, because the broader involvement they manage, the better chance they'll have of pulling the night off. And while that's an important goal, it's not the group's only goal.

"One day is a neat thing, but one day's not enough," Sommers said. "We hope families will recognize the importance of doing this on their own."

To join the effort or for information, call (248) 473-1841 or e-mail cyf@farmib.org

Voters guides available

Voter guides prepared by the League of Women Voters for the Nov. 5 general election are available at all public libraries and city/township halls in Oakland County.

There are two guides: State of Michigan, covering candidates for federal and statewide offices plus state ballot proposals; and Oakland County, covering candidates for the state legislature and county offices plus the county proposal.

The voter guide information is also online at www.dnet.org.

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