Federal regulations blamed

'Staggering' proposed sewage hikes draw fire

By TOM LONERGAN

Oakland County homeowners face at least a 30 percent increase in their water bills next year as a result of new sewage treatment rates proposed by the Detroit Water and Sewage Department.

The increases, proposed to take effect in January, must be approved by U.S. District Judge John Feikens, who has presided over a federal government lawsuit to bring Detroit's sewage treatment plant in compliance with anti-pollution regulations.

An Oakland County official last week called the proposed increases "staggering" and raised many questions about how they were determined.

The new rates — proposed in a report by the sewage department's consulting firm, Camp, Dresser and McKee of Detroit — would be effective through June 1981. The consultant's report is due in federal court on Sept. 1.

RATES AND surcharges for 359 industrial and commercial customers in the metropolitan area may increase from 30 to 300 percent, according to the consultant's report, "with food processors and beverage producers hardest hit."

Federal regulations now require industry to pay back, over a 30-year period, a proportional share of federal grants used to construct wastewater treatment facilities. While a moratorium has been placed on the charges, the consultants said Detroit must issue bills and establish retroactive charges.

The treatment plant on the Detroit river also services 75 suburban communities besides Detroit.

The new wholesale rates are being charged to meet clean water regulations to which Detroit agreed in a consent judgement to settle a lawsuit nearly two years ago. The proposed rates must also follow a settlement reached last fall between the city sewage department and suburban customers, who had protested the water utility's rate structure as well as increased charges to bring the plant into compliance.

The new charges in January could increase homeowners' quarterly water bills 30 percent next year.

— Robert Fredericks, chief deputy drain commissioner.

THE PROPOSED wholesale rate to be charged to the South Oakland County Sewage Disposal System, which serves 350,000 southeast Oakland residents, would be $3.45 per 1,000 cubic feet of sewage. The current $2 per 1,000 cubic feet charge increases to $2.50 July 1.

The July increase, which is the final portion of a three-tier rate hike, already has been approved by the court.

The proposed January increase would mean the southern Oakland County sewage district's wholesale rate will jump 72 percent in one year.

Robert Fredericks, chief deputy drain commissioner for Oakland County, said the new charges in January could increase homeowners' quarterly water bills 30 percent next year. The Troy attorney's estimate doesn't take into account charges cities and townships may add.

Customers of the Clinton-Oakland Sewage District, which includes most of West Bloomfield Township, Avon Township and other northern Oakland County communities, will feel the effect of a proposed 34 percent increase in the sewage district's wholesale rate.

Clinton-Oakland's rate will be $4.27 per 1,000 cubic feet July 1 and is proposed to increase to $5.74 in January.

NEIGHBORING MACOMB County residents would experience the biggest increase.

Macomb County Sewage District could be hit with a 60 percent increase, if, as Detroit recommends, customers of that district assume the cost of repairing a giant interceptor sewer under 15 Mile Road that collapsed last summer. Macomb officials argue the repair cost should be shared by everyone in the region.

The wholesale rate charged to the City of Detroit is proposed to increase 31 percent.

Fredericks told the Board of Detroit Water Commissioners at a public hearing last week that the increases over the last 10 years have been "staggering."

He said since 1969, the wholesale sewage treatment rates have increased "almost 1,000 percent." Since 1975, the rates have increased more than 430 percent, he added.

The major part of the increases are due to new federal regulations, Fredericks said later in an interview.

He said the water utility's operating budget is up $10 million in fiscal 1980 and questioned whether the Detroit department is bringing the plant into federal compliance "as cost effectively as it should."

HE REPEATED the county's criticisms of the Detroit residency requirement in hiring. Suburban officials contend it hinders the city's ability to get trained personnel to work at the plant.

Fredericks questioned what percentage of the sewage department's budget covers consultants operating the plant rather than employees.

Fredericks referred to a report to the court prepared last year that said $71 million had been spent or obligated by the sewage department for consultants' fees and engineering design work. "Are they part of the rate increase structure?" he asked.

The board promised Fredericks it would answer the county's questions.

Pound ups penalties

If your dog has the freedom to roam Oakland County, you'll be paying more to get him out of the pound.

That assumes, of course, that the pup is a stray and was caught by the county's animal control division.

The County Board of Commissioners last week tripled the dog pickup fee to $15, effective July 1 and established a graduated fee for repeat offenders.

If your dog is caught wandering a second time, it will cost $30 to retrieve him and $50 for the third offense.

Commissioner John Peterson, R-Rochester, said stray dogs are a "problem I hear most about second only to roads." The $5 fine was "not severe enough to control strays," Peterson said.

The board approved the increased fines 22-1, after rejecting an amendment to reduce the increase.

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