

Bullard supports turning system over to regional group

BY MIKE MALOTT
HOMETOWN NEWS SERVICE
mmalott@hometownnews.net

For years, suburbanites have believed they are being overcharged by the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department.

State Sen. Bill Bullard (R-Milford) said the city makes a "profit" on the water service it provides to its suburban customer communities. And the dispute over rates has led to an ongoing federal court case between the suburbs and city, initially filed back in 1977.

Despite the fact that numerous attempts to regionalize the Detroit water system have failed in the past, Bullard said he decided to re-raise the issue in the state Legislature this fall when he heard talk over the summer of a southeast Michigan "culture tax" to support the arts in the city.

Bullard introduced Senate Bill 781 Tuesday, Oct. 5, to have the Detroit water and sewer systems taken over by a regional authority. As in previous proposals, the bill would establish a regional assembly, giving customer communities votes based on their usage of the water and sewer systems. The regional assembly would meet annually to approve water and sewer rates, projects for improvement of the system, and to elect a regional authority board to oversee the operation of the systems throughout the rest of the year.

"We hear a lot of talk from Detroit interests about the need to cooperate, and money for the arts is one example," Bullard said, citing the proposal for a regional tax to support the Detroit Institute of Arts and the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, as well as other cultural institutions in the southeast Michigan region. "But when the suburbs talk about it, we don't get that cooperation."

That's comparing "apples to oranges," says Sen. Jon Young, Jr. (D-Detroit). "The DIA is used by people across the state and across the country. The water system is used by just its four million customers."

Young said he's seen this pro-

posal many times in the 20 years he's been in the Legislature. While rates are higher in the suburbs, he said they should be because the cost of transporting water to customers increases the further from Detroit they are located. Installation of lines and maintenance are the primary cost factors, he said.

But he also noted that many customer communities tack on charges to the water bills before passing them on to residents. Those additional community charges account for much of the additional cost of water in the suburbs.

Bullard's bill would not compensate the city for the takeover of the water department.

"You are assuming that Detroit has some equity in the system. It does not," Bullard said. "It has been established in federal court that Detroit's equity in it was paid off in a series of payments made to Detroit's General Fund from the water department in the late-1980s. Since then, it has been operating on a user fee basis."

Regionalization of the water system has been the subject of numerous bills introduced to the Legislature since the 1960s. One such bill was approved by the Senate in 1993, but the most recent attempt, in 1997, never even moved out of committee.

Nonetheless, Bullard said he believes the plan has a good

chance of passage this time. He noted that there has been a high turnover in the Legislature since the issue was last considered. And he has 24 co-sponsors signed on to support the bill.

Detroit's system supplies water and sewer services to 126 communities in the southeast Michigan region, including most of western Wayne and Oakland counties. Some four million customers in the region receive Detroit water.

"We see a history of mismanagement and corruption in the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department," Bullard said. "Now, some people will say that goes back 20 years, but there was an employee of the department who was recently indicted for taking bribes. Mind you, that was an indictment, not a conviction. Still, there's a history. And there is a history of handing out no-bid contracts. Maybe in the past year they have cleaned up their contract letting process, but it still has a history of no-bid contracts."

Those issues do indeed go back 20 years, Young said. Today, the Detroit water department is a well run organization, he said.

"The Detroit water department is doing a good job. This is like takeovers on Wall Street, no one wants to take over an unhealthy operation. It is because it's a healthy department that others want to take it over."

Proponents of regionalization use the issue for reelection purposes and to stir up the sentiments of suburban voters, Young

said. Those who move out of the city should consider the additional cost of services in the communities to which they move, he

said. The issue, Young responded, "holds a tinge of race baiting."

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Survivors up for tax deductions

BY MIKE MALOTT
HOMETOWN NEWS SERVICE
mmalott@hometownnews.net

Survivors of the Holocaust, or heirs or beneficiaries of victims of Nazi persecution during World War II, may soon come into substantial money.

Those who live in Michigan would receive their settlements tax free under legislation pending before the state House of Representatives.

The House Tax Policy Committee on Tuesday took up House Bill 4796, sponsored by State Rep. Marc Shulman (R-West Bloomfield).

The proposal would allow Holocaust survivors, or the heirs or beneficiaries of victims, to deduct from their income tax returns any reparations or returned assets paid to them.

"Holocaust survivors have waited decades for the return of their personal items and holdings," Rep. Nancy Cassia (R-Novi) said. "Exempting the income tax on these items is the least the state can do for people who have suffered through the worst human tragedy of this millennium."

The state proposal follows deductions already in place at the federal level. Cassia said she expects there will be many residents of southeast Michigan who receive settlement payments, although she was unable to estimate a number.

Some 120 Swiss companies — including banks and insurance companies — may soon distribute \$1.25 billion to 60,000 survivors and heirs in 40 countries as a result of a proposed settlement in an international lawsuit referred to as the "Holocaust Victims Asset Litigation."

The settlement covers unclaimed bank deposits, abandoned artwork and unpaid insurance proceeds, as well as other assets, left with companies in Switzerland by Jewish families between 1920-45. The settlement was proposed last year, and has been under review by a Swiss commission. Payments could begin in November when the review is expected to be completed.

HB 4796 is expected to receive legislative approval with little or no opposition this fall, Cassia said.

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