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Proposed increase has residents crying foul

C District residents may see sewer rate hike due to Project Clean Lake

By **TERRY BRLAS**
North Royalton Post editor

The Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District held its sixth and final public meeting to discuss a proposed rate increase at Parma's Memorial Hall on Wednesday, Nov. 17. The proposed rate increase is for 13 percent annually from 2012 to 2016 with additional increases of 6 percent annually through the year 2035 to pay for Project Clean Lake, a \$3 billion, 25-year program.

The standing room-only crowd was the largest turnout of any of the meetings that began on Nov. 4. The only thing missing from the contentious meeting were pitchforks and torches.

As far as the multitude gathered in Parma were concerned Frankenstein was NEORSD. Actually it was Frank Greenland, director of watershed programs, who presented the utility's case and took questions from the mostly angry audience.

The utility is forthcoming when it tells the public that the rate increase will be significant. It is currently finalizing a rate study. These increases affect North Royalton residents served by NEORSD.

The rate increase will help pay for the construction of large-scale tunnels and the use of green infrastructure to minimize the amount of storm water making its way to the sewer system.



Emotions ran high and frustrations boiled over at times during a public meeting hosted by the Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District at Parma's Memorial Hall on Wednesday, Nov. 17.

Photo by TERRY BRLAS

Project Clean Lake will enable NEORSD to meet Clean Water Act standards and address water quality issues caused by raw sewage that overflows into the environment during rain events. The goal is to reduce the total volume of raw sewage discharges from 4.5 billion gallons to 494 million gallons annually.

Cleveland was ground zero for the clean up the environment movement in the early 1970s after the Cuyahoga River caught fire in 1969. The Clean Water Act was created by Congress in 1972 to address water quality issues, like raw sewage discharges. The Cleveland Regional Sewer District, now NEORSD, was

formed that same year to tackle broad regional problems. The Environmental Protection Agency considers the Cleveland area in violation of the Clean Water Act because not all discharges have been controlled to required levels.

NEORSD entered into a consent decree with the Department of Justice, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, and the Ohio Attorney General's office.

"We can't get a sense of what people are feeling sitting behind a desk," Julius Ciaccia Jr., NEORSD executive director, said. "We have to let the people vent and they did. We've listened to them."

Some in the crowd interrupted Green-

land during his presentation with catcalls whenever the issue turned to money, whether it be the cost of the project or the cost to taxpayers.

Two individuals passed through the crowd with microphones hoping to keep the meeting on task during the question and answer session. This did not stop some individuals from stating their displeasure even when they were without a mic, but plenty amped.

"These rates are unconscionable and preposterous," one resident said. "I suggest you go back to the drawing board and negotiate with the federal government."

Greenland stated the NEORSD is working toward rate equalization of the region as Project Clean Lake moves forward. Percent increases in Cleveland during the next five years will be higher than those in the suburbs, but will eventually be equal.

Some residents suggested that the NEORSD go to litigation over Project Clean Lake. This is not an option, according to Greenland.

"Our fear is going to litigation sets a new floor for the negotiations," he said.

Strongsville resident Ed Olivares asked Greenland if federal funding could have been obtained for this project.

"We continue to lobby with the National Association of Clean Water Agencies about the possibility of better funding sources for these programs. Congress controls the Clean Water Act and grant funding. We've been very active at the

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federal level for over a decade. At the current time it's not there, but we will continue to look," Greenland responded. "In terms of the awards in the state of Ohio we did well. That's not going to cut it."

North Royalton resident Dolores Antonelli moved from Gates Mills, where she lived for 26 years, a little over one year ago. Gates Mills does not have sewers so this is new territory for her.

"It's the economic situation that bothers me the most. Maybe we do need all of this, but they better find someplace else to get the money," she said. "Why can't they cut costs? If you want something new in your home and you can't afford it you cut something else. That's what they have to do."

Sewers in Greater Cleveland were designed and built to transport both sanitary sewage and rain water in one pipe. During a heavy rain event, the pipe can become too full, discharging raw sewage into the environment. Combine sewer overflows were placed into the system to get sewage out of basements and streets, and into waterways. During a rain storm, water flowing over hard surfaces rushes quickly into sewers.

This flow is known as runoff and can cause a dramatic increase of water flowing into and through the combined sewers. When this happens, control devices may allow some of the flow (storm water and sewage) to overflow into area waterways to prevent urban flooding and damage to wastewater treatment facilities. The EPA regulates CSOs.

"Combined sewer overflows is one of the biggest issues in front of the EPA," Greenland said. "The plan calls for a 95 percent reduction in sewer overflow. Whether we like it or not, the Great Lakes are a precious asset and there is great scrutiny on us."

The CSOs would be cemented and blocked, according to Jeannie Chapman, public information specialist with the NEORS. D.

Per Project Clean Lake, seven tunnels would be constructed throughout



Photo by TERRY BRLAS
Kellie Rotunno, director of engineering and construction with NEORS, answers a question at the public meeting regarding Project Clean Lake, a \$3 billion initiative, and the associated rate increases.

Cuyahoga County. The closest one to North Royalton would be the Mill Creek tunnel in Garfield Heights. Citizens in North Royalton would still bear the rate increase.

County councilman-elect from District 5, Michael Gallagher, believes the rate increase is somewhat of a done deal.

"This should have been started 40 years ago and they kept putting it off and here we are. They are going to do this," he said.

Recently elected County Council representative from District 1 David Greenspan was at the public meeting and said the impact of the proposed rate increase is far reaching.

"This affects the entire county. It could have a significant impact on not only residents, but future development in the region," he said. "People are on fixed incomes and this is a significant impact."

North Royalton residents affected by these rate increases are the 1,700 accounts serviced by NEORS that live in C district in the northeast corner of the city. The remaining residents are serviced

by the North Royalton's Wastewater Department.

"We know what our fixed costs are. We've taken a lot of steps to lower our rates," North Royalton Mayor Bob Stefanik said. "We have been working on our cross connections."

The Wastewater Department has been ensuring that each house is not cross connected, meaning it is not bringing in more storm water into the sanitary sewer system. These connections help eliminate some flooding issues.

The current sewer charge in North Royalton is \$50.50 per Mcf (1,000 cubic feet of water used), which includes maintenance. The price will increase to \$52.50 per Mcf in 2012.

NEORS rates for the suburbs are \$44.25 per Mcf for 2010. They are scheduled to increase to \$48 per Mcf regardless of Project Clean Lake.

"We want to see how this shakes out," Stefanik said of Project Clean Lake. "We've looked to the future. We'll be ready to react when we have to."

Another area mayor, Gary Starr of

Middleburg Heights, sits on the board of NEORS. He thinks the organization of which he has served as a trustee for the past 17 years should take the next year to review its options before implementing the rate increase, which compounds as it is implemented every year.

"Customers have had a very short period of time to look at these facts of highly technical information that details how the yearly rates will skyrocket from an average of \$360 to \$1,000 in four years," he said. "This is a 47-page agreement negotiated behind the scenes without any public examination or without any board knowledge. When they introduced the \$57 storm water fee for the entire year 206 meetings were held. They call this a fee. It is a tax by any other name. What I am asking is to delay this decision for one year so we have time to study it, comment on it and voice our concerns."

The rate increase is scheduled to be voted on by the board of the NEORS on Dec. 2 at 12:30 p.m. Starr asked Ciaccia if the meeting and vote could be rescheduled to the evening so those who work during the day could attend.

Ciaccia told Starr it was up to the seven-member board. If the board decided to reschedule the meeting to the evening it could be held then. In addition to Starr, the only board member in attendance was Vice President Ronald Sulik.

"This is the same EPA that is telling everyone in this room that they don't care what we have to do to fix what they deem as proper. The answer is to get rid of the EPA," Mary O'Malley said. "You told us your take on it. This is our take on it. We can't afford it."

Noticeably absent from the meeting were any representatives of the EPA or Department of Justice.

"The EPA has the law behind them," Ciaccia said. "I told them I'm the one who is going to have to face the customers, not you. We were dealing with the U.S. Justice Department. They're not coming anywhere. They don't care. They see the law in black and white. They say you're out of compliance. Here is what you have to do to comply. We tried to negotiate the best deal that we could."

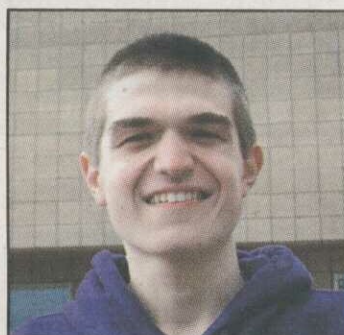
NORTH ROYALTON STREET TALK

If you were to add another pet to your household, what would it be?



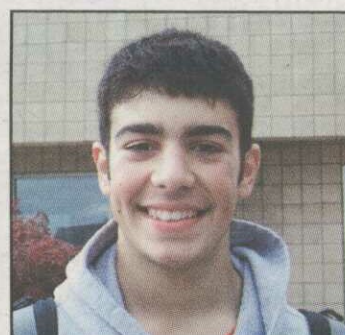
Phil Oko

"I would add a Platypus because they are the only mammal that lays eggs."



Josh Kaiser

"I'd add another dog because they are friendly and fun to play with."



Dominick Pissini

"A Dodo bird and yes, I know they are extinct."



Zach Figas

"I would add a black Lab because they are cool and friendly."



Rachel Andexler

"A monkey because it would be as crazy as I am."