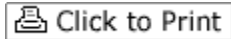




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Sewer rates may double to help pay for project

330,000 customers to share cost; public meetings set

By Paula Schleis
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Last summer, Summit County Council filed a lawsuit to stop the Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District from charging a stormwater fee that would cost the average homeowner about \$57 a year.

Now the sewer district faces the daunting task of introducing another purse-pinching project — one that would at least double the sewer rates of its customers under an impending federal mandate.

The agency has scheduled a series of public meetings to explain Project Clean Lake, a \$3 billion, 25-year series of capital improvements to Cuyahoga County's infrastructure.

Because the agency is a regional district, all 330,000 customers would share in the cost.

That includes about 30,000 customers in the northern Summit County communities of Hudson, Macedonia, Boston Heights, Northfield, Northfield Center Township, Richfield, Richfield Township, Sagamore Hills and a handful of homes in Twinsburg, Twinsburg Township and Bath Township.

'Green infrastructure'

Project Clean Lake is an effort to address the fact many older communities have sewers designed to transport both sanitary sewage and rain water in one pipe. During a heavy rain, the pipe can become too full, discharging raw sewage into the environment.

The agency wants to stop that through the construction of large-scale tunnels and the use of "green infrastructure" to minimize the amount of stormwater making its way to the sewer system.

"From what I understand, we're looking at communities more surrounded by the lake. That's the oldest infrastructure," spokeswoman Jeannie Chapman said.

None of the troublesome combined sewers is in the sewer district's Summit County communities, but Chapman said all customers would foot the bill, just as Cuyahoga County customers would have to pony up if Summit County needed work.

A rate study still needs to be done, but early estimates are that customers would see their bills climb 18 percent each year between 2012 and 2016, Chapman said.

"At this point, we just don't know for sure," she said.

The sewer district has met with affected mayors and city managers, but this will be the first opportunity to "go out to the communities and talk about the program with the public," Chapman said.

Opposition expected

Asked if agency officials were bracing for a tough reception, she replied: "Absolutely. We're very cognizant with current economic conditions, people will not be very happy. We want to give them a chance to ask questions and to vent if they need to."

Summit County Councilman Nick Kostandaras is eager to do both. He said no one has explained Project Clean Lake to him, and it sounds like another stormwater fee fiasco.

The sewer district wanted to implement that fee starting Oct. 1 to generate \$38 million to deal with long-standing flooding,

erosion and water-quality problems in the region.

Summit County Council filed suit in Summit County Common Pleas Court, arguing that the district doesn't have the authority to charge a fee for something that is not related to sewer service.

The sewer district responded by asking the Cuyahoga County Common Pleas Court to certify its right to charge the fee. That court is not expected to make a decision before March, and the fee remains in limbo.

"I am not happy that the Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District is going to be taking any money from our people," Kostandaras said.

"I know [the agency] has a \$1.2 billion shortfall and they are trying to get it out of Summit County. Until I see their records, I'm not in favor of giving them any money at all," he said.

Paul Buescher, a Northfield Center Township trustee who helped lead the charge against the stormwater fee, said he also is irked at the idea of Summit County customers paying for capital improvements in Cuyahoga County but doesn't know enough about Project Clean Lake to say whether it could be challenged on legal grounds.

"Where the stormwater issue comes in, this is a gray area and something our county council would have to determine" whether or not to fight, he said.

The sewer district has been in negotiations with federal and state officials over Project Clean Lake and expects to enter into a consent decree by the end of this year, Chapman said.

The consent decree will detail the project, its time frame and cost and be a legally binding document between the sewer district, the Department of Justice, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Ohio Environmental Protection Agency and the Ohio Attorney General's Office.

The sewer district said the plan is its way of meeting federal Clean Water Act regulations.

Discharges cut

While the district has reduced the amount of raw sewage discharging into the environment from 9 billion gallons in the early 1970s to 4.5 billion gallons today, the EPA says not all discharges have been controlled to required levels.

Project Clean Lake would reduce the total volume of raw discharges from 4.5 billion gallons to 494 million gallons annually, the sewer district said.

The city of Akron is facing a similar federal mandate to curtail sewer overflows in the next 18 years and reducing the overflows will cost in excess of \$588 million. Sewer rates have been hiked for Akron and surrounding communities.

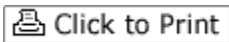
The sewer district said Cincinnati and Columbus are among nearly 800 communities facing similar problems and working on long-term plans, with most of them raising rates to fund projects.

In addition to meetings in South Euclid, Cleveland, Maple Heights and Parma, the sewer district will host a meeting in Hudson at 7 p.m. Nov. 8 at the Barlow Community Center, 41 S. Oviatt St.

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