



## Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District's spending on ads is questioned

By Joan Mazzolini, The Plain Dealer

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Customers of the **Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District** who have seen a steady stream of rates increases are questioning why the agency needs to spend money to advertise.

The district spent \$300,000 last year on radio, television and newspaper advertisements, and the amount will be higher this year.

District officials acknowledge there have been complaints but say the expense is relatively small and works out to about 90 cents a year for each household or business served by the agency. And they say the agency needs to educate customers on what it does and what's coming up, said Julius Ciaccia, executive director.

"We've been such an out-of-sight, out-of-mind governmental agency for so long," he said. "It's such a steep climb to get people to understand who we are and what we do.

"From a public-education standpoint -- we need to really ramp it up mid to later part of this year going to next year."

That's because even more rate increases are coming up. In addition to a fee to help regulate storm water runoff that is likely to go into effect this summer, a double-digit rate increase may be coming in 2012 and beyond to pay for construction of systems the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is mandating to keep sewage from overflowing into lakes and rivers during heavy rains.

The fix is likely to include building giant tunnels and massive tanks to hold overflow until it can be treated, rather than releasing it into waterways.

Negotiations are under way between the district and the EPA over when the fixes need to be completed.

The EPA has been pushing 15 years and the district 30. How long the district has makes a huge difference in residents' sewer bills. Board members are expected to vote for a schedule of rate increases for those projects next year.

The district has budgeted \$350,000 this year for advertising.

Ciaccia said the advertisements are a tenth of a percent of the district's budget, which will total about \$300 million this year.



The Plain Dealer/Gus Chan

A man wades back down Scranton Road after a July 2009 storm. A Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District storm water plan would help reduce floods in heavy rains.

- **Opposition builds to planned storm water fees**

"While it's certainly good money, it's money well spent and it's not going to affect rate increases," he said.

Before 2008, the district rarely advertised. That year it spent about \$100,000 on ads.

**Advertisements** have been on about 10 radio stations in the region and three local television stations as well as in the Call & Post, Crain's Cleveland Business, the Akron Beacon Journal and The Plain Dealer.

The district, with 330,000 accounts and about 1 million customers, includes all or a portion of 61 communities in Cuyahoga and Summit counties, as well as a tiny portion of Lake and Lorain counties.

"The board members have been huge proponents of getting the word out," said Jean Chapman, spokeswoman for the district. "There have been many discussions during the board meetings about public education and the expectation that we constantly get information to the public."

Chapman said the advertising budget was increased this year to ensure that people understand both the new storm water program and the bigger hit homeowners will take when the EPA mandate kicks in.

The storm water program comes with a first-year fee of \$57 for an average-size house that could go into effect in July.

Sewer rates went up 9 percent this year and are scheduled to go up 9 percent in 2011 to help pay for major projects already under way to help alleviate the overflow problem.

"We don't want people to feel like they weren't informed," Chapman said.

Chapman said that besides the media buys, which get the word out to a large number of people, the district does low-cost outreach with schools and environmental and watershed groups, and has booths at events like the home and flower show and Earthfest.

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