



Northeast Ohio's sewer deal with the feds is as good as it's going to get: editorial

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Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District board member Gary Starr

When politicians lack the courage to make hard decisions, there's only one sure outcome: Bigger problems, and a bigger price tag to fix them.

That's why Middleburg Heights Mayor Gary Starr needs to rethink **his very public opposition** to a proposed \$3 billion settlement to resolve a six-year battle between the Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Starr can't claim to be in the dark about talks that have been under way for five years, according to terms he voted to approve as regional sewer board chairman in 2005. At that time, a \$1.7 billion plan was on the table; costs have ballooned since. The final deal goes before board members for a vote Dec. 2.

Starr has a deserved reputation on the board as someone willing to ask the hard questions. But in this case, he appears to be grandstanding to curry favor with voters who would like to avoid paying higher sewer bills.

Yet Starr knows better than most that an increase is



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unavoidable. Customers will either pay now or pay even more later.

There's a strong possibility that if the district abandons this plan, the EPA's lawyers will seek to force repairs on their terms. Why waste time and money fending them off, especially after sewer district?

Executive Director Julius Ciaccia says the district achieved relatively favorable terms. The proposed settlement allows the district 25 years, instead of the usual 15 to 20, to make improvements -- a lengthy term only one other region

Sewer District Executive
Director Julius Ciaccia

has managed to negotiate. It also offers what may be a novel opportunity to save money by using green projects such as retention basins instead of expensive tunnels.

This deal isn't cheap, but sewer bills will rise only moderately through 2016 -- an average \$10 more on a monthly bill of \$40. And though prices will continue to rise through 2035, Ciaccia said there would be aid for people with limited incomes, a promise he must honor.

Starr's suggested moratorium may be tempting, but it's fool's gold. There's no escaping the reality of the problem: decrepit sanitary and storm sewers that regularly overflow into Lake Erie and its tributaries during storms.

Instead of trying to upend this deal, Starr needs to take a leadership role in solving a problem that wishing and hoping won't fix.

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