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Atlanta sewer bills going on the rise

Users will pay for costly work on troubled system

Julie B. Hairston - Staff

Tuesday, August 14, 2001

When Atlantans flush their toilets in the coming years, they may be hearing the whoosh of money being carried away.

Mayor Bill Campbell announced Monday the launch of a billion-dollar sewer improvement program that will redesign more than a quarter of the city's most troublesome sewer piping, construct a seven-mile tunnel across north Atlanta and build or redesign treatment plants throughout the city. Ultimately, the city will spend about \$3 billion trying to fix its antiquated, polluting sewers.

The work could end up costing sewer customers more than \$100 a month over their current bills by the time the \$3 billion is spent.

Campbell said city officials have not yet determined the exact increase that will be required to pay for the improvements, but he said rate hikes are unavoidable.

City officials have said that for each \$1 billion the city spends, sewage bills will increase at least \$35 a month. The average homeowner currently pays \$31 a month.

Deputy Public Works Director David Peters said city sewer customers probably will see a small rate increase, about 5 percent, by the end of this year.

The mayor said he and his advisers are searching for ways to be sensitive to the financial burden this will impose on people with limited or fixed incomes. So far, they have not come up with a plan to ease the difficulties a sharp increase in sewer rates will pose for those groups.

The plan set out by Campbell on Monday is the result of a settlement the city reached with federal and state environmental officials to clean up the pollution the city has been dumping in local waterways for decades. Atlanta has been under pressure from state and federal agencies as well as environmental groups for more than 15 years to stop fouling local waters.

The problem is the city's antiquated sewer system, which combines raw sewage with storm water. When it rains, as it normally does more than 60 times a year in Atlanta, the pipes quickly become overburdened.

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The pipes were designed to spill into creeks at strategic points in the city --- called "combined sewer overflows," or CSOs. Mini-treatment facilities built in the 1990s are supposed to remove untreated sewage, storm water, toilet paper, and other crude material, but the results don't meet federal standards.

Currently, the city's 200 miles of combined sewers pour more than 14 million pounds of suspended solids into waterways, including the Chattahoochee River, every year.

Under the settlement, the city must complete its plan by Nov. 7, 2007.

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Atlanta City Councilwoman Clair Muller said she is working with other local officials nationwide to find funding that will help the city pay for its improvements. "We are working very hard to get as much financing as possible, but the rates will go up," Muller said.

Many cities across the country are facing similar environmental and financial dilemmas as they strive to comply with federal clean water standards, according to Campbell. New Orleans, Las Vegas and Chicago also are struggling with needed sewer upgrades and how to pay their staggering costs, he said.

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But Campbell said the improvements are necessary if Atlanta is to sustain its recently renewed business and residential growth.

"No one would buy a house that had bad pipes and bad plumbing," Campbell said. "And no one wants to live in a city with bad pipes and bad plumbing."

The city will conduct a series of seven public meetings to discuss the plan and hear city residents' opinions about the proposal that recently received the approval of the federal Environmental Protection Agency and the state Environmental Protection Division. Many neighborhood advocates already have complained about the plan because it stops short of a total separation of the city's combined sewers.

But Campbell said total separation, while a commendable goal, cannot be accomplished by the EPA's 2007 deadline, and would be too disruptive to vital areas of the city.

"In a perfect world, complete separation would be a preferable solution, but because of time constraints . . . we are unable to include it as part of this plan," Campbell said.

Public meetings scheduled on improvement program

These are the dates and locations for Atlanta's public meetings on its \$3 billion sewer improvement program. All begin at 7 p.m.

- > Tuesday, Aug. 21 --- Northside United Methodist Church, 2799 Northside Drive N.W.
- > Wednesday, Aug. 22 --- Adams Park Recreation Center, 1620 Delowe Drive S.W.
- > Thursday, Aug. 23 --- Mozley Park, 1565 Martin Luther King Jr. Drive N.W.
- > Monday, Aug. 27 --- Southeast Recreation Center, 365 Cleveland Ave. S.E., Room 202
- > Tuesday, Aug. 28 --- Harriet G. Darnell Senior Center, 677 Fairburn Road N.W.
- > Wednesday, Aug. 29 --- Zoo Atlanta, Coca-Cola World Studio, The ARC, 800 Cherokee Ave. S.E.
- > Monday, Sept. 10 --- Atlanta City Hall, Old Council Chambers, 68 Mitchell St. S.W., 3rd Floor

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