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## Fee increase would address sewage spills

MSD, council must OK plan

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The Metropolitan Sewer District is asking for a big rate increase that would hit everyone who flushes for the next 17 years.

Most customers would pay a new \$6.95 flat monthly fee, starting Aug. 1, under a proposal that must be approved by the MSD Board of Directors and Louisville Metro Council.

That additional fee adds 32 percent to the average monthly sewer bill of \$21.17.

The money is needed to pay for an estimated \$800 million in improvements that will help stop sewer pipes from dumping about 4 billion gallons of raw sewage into waterways every year. The work, part of a federal consent decree, must be completed by 2024.

Commercial and industrial customers would pay the flat fee, plus an additional charge of about 80 cents per 1,000 gallons of water used every month.

But customers 65 years or older who earn less than \$25,000 a year would receive a 30 percent discount.

The current monthly service rates would not increase this year or next, MSD Director Bud Schardein said. But starting in 2009, both the monthly rate and the flat fee would be subject to increases of 5 percent to 6 percent a year.

That would raise the average monthly bill in 2010 to \$32.64. The same 30 percent senior discount would apply to those increases.

Metro Council member Tina Ward-Pugh, D-9th, a member of the group that will recommend how MSD proceeds with the sewer projects, said she thinks the council will support the increases. The council must approve any MSD rate increase of more than 7 percent.

"I'm not suggesting it will be unanimous," Ward-Pugh said. "But absolutely, council will be behind it."

Some residents are concerned about the cost.

Roseanne Southard, a Germantown resident, said she feels held hostage by utility companies such as MSD. Southard also said she worries about money being wasted with so many projects being performed under a tight deadline.

"We don't have any recourse," she said. "These agencies all want more money, and I'm not making any more. Yet they dig deeper and deeper into my pockets."

## **Environmental reaction**

Leslie Barras, associate director of River Fields Inc., an Ohio River conservation group, said the consent decree should benefit local waterways if it is carried out correctly.

But Meme Sweets Runyon, executive director of River Fields, said it's unfortunate that ratepayers have to pay so much because MSD has known for years about its problem.

"It's too bad the entire cost has to be passed on to (rate) payers," she said.

Hank Graddy, a Midway, Ky., lawyer who represents the Sierra Club, said he would have preferred a more aggressive plan. "We would have liked a good deal more specifics and a shorter timetable."

Schardein said about \$500 million will be spent between now and 2013.

"It's the right thing to do. I just want to make sure that it's done at a reasonable pace that's not going to break people here," Schardein said

The flat fee could be eliminated in 2024, when the work is done, he said.

## **The problem**

The improvements are part of a federal mandate, called a consent decree, that was negotiated among the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the U.S. Justice Department, Kentucky's Environmental and Public Protection Cabinet and metro government.

The consent decree outlines a schedule under which MSD must meet water-quality standards by Dec. 31, 2024.

MSD is under pressure to speed up repairs to the sanitary sewer overflows, which are illegal and are caused by crumbling pipes that fill with water during heavy rain. About 500 million gallons of sewage spews from the overflows in Louisville every year.

Schardein said about 70 percent of the discharges from sewer overflows will be eliminated by 2013 under the agency's current plan.

The rest of the sewage comes from combined overflows, which are pipes designed to carry rain water and sewage. Sewage flowing from combined sewers must be greatly reduced for the city to meet federal water-quality standards. The agency has until 2024 to fix those overflows.

Schardein wrote in a memo to council members this week that the consent decree is the "fairest and most reasonable" possible, with the "costs that are the fairest and least burdensome for all our customers."

## **Sewers date to 1800s**

Schardein said ratepayers already are covering more than \$150 million in sewer system improvements, but more is needed for the city's aged system -- some of which dates to the 1800s -- to be in compliance with federal water-quality standards.

That initial \$150 million has gone to upgrade the system and pay for things such as eliminating 44,000 septic tanks and more than 300 package wastewater-treatment plants in suburban neighborhoods.

There are more than 3,200 miles of sewer lines in Jefferson County.

Louisville Mayor Jerry Abramson said the work is necessary "for the health of our waterways and for the health of the community."

Abramson said that other cities signing consent decrees with the EPA are paying much more -- Cincinnati \$2.5 billion and Birmingham, Ala., \$2.9 billion.

"We have no choice," he said. "That's the bottom line."

Reporter James Bruggers contributed. Dan Klepal can be reached at (502) 582-4475.

## **COMPARING SEWER RATES**

How Louisville's sewer rates stack up against other cities'.

<b>City</b>	<b>2007 average monthly rate</b>	<b>2007 average annual rate</b>	<b>2010 average monthly rate</b>	<b>2010 average annual rate</b>
Louisville	\$28.12	\$337.44	\$32.64	\$391.68
Birmingham	\$43.50	\$522.00	\$85.74	\$1,028.88
Cincinnati	\$35.91	\$430.92	\$45.91	\$550.92
Atlanta	\$48.09	\$577.08	\$60.56	\$726.72

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