

our views

SEWER REPAIRS: PAY NOW OR LATER

THE ISSUE HRSD's repairs will cause bills to triple over 20 years.

WHERE WE STAND

Cleaning up the Bay demands major fixes.

NOBODY ever wants to pay more. Not for a box of cereal, not for gasoline, not for trash pickup. Given the option, we would all say no to any increase in prices or taxes.

Politicians get elected by pandering to that reluctance. They win votes by promising simple, cheap solutions to complicated, expensive problems.

That's how Hampton Roads residents wound up with highway tolls we can't avoid or afford, with the highest trash fees in the nation, with a social safety net that's bankrupting us. It's how we end up expecting artificially low rates for all kinds of things, including sewer service.

Hampton Roads Sanitation District has a problem. The agency manages the sewers in 17 cities and counties. Some of those now-decrepit systems date to the agency's start in the 1940s and need expensive upgrades to avoid spilling nasty stuff into creeks and rivers. The agency also faces new requirements connected with Chesapeake Bay cleanup.

That adds up to \$1.2 billion, as *The Pilot's* Scott Harper reported Saturday. To pay that repair bill, HRSD plans a rate increase of more than 200 percent by 2031. Rates have already doubled in the past five years. The average bill today is \$19.83; by 2031 it will be \$60.45.

Those are eye-popping increases. Yet they are necessary. Hampton Roads' experience with another regional waste agency provides the explanation.

The board of the Southeastern Public Service Authority — which picks up the region's trash — kept rates low for most

of the agency's first decades, even as it spent millions on equipment and services. Board members have said repeatedly that they made the decision to keep rates low and pile on debt rather than face the wrath of the member cities.

But that shortsightedness left SPSA so deep in debt three years ago that it fired a huge portion of its workers and sold a profitable subsidiary just to survive. Trash fees in the region now rank among the highest in America.

As Harper's story pointed out, the low-profile HRSD rarely attracts notice. The governor, not the cities served, names its board, which explains why the impending rate increases surprised members of the region's city councils.

But the reasons for HRSD's spending are hardly a surprise. The Chesapeake Bay has been under assault from sewage up and down the watershed. Nutrients — phosphorous and nitrogen — lead to algae blooms, which kill plants and animals.

The agency faces pressure and deadlines from the state and the federal Environmental Protection Agency to complete the repairs. And, as HRSD's general manager noted, low interest rates coupled with work-starved engineering and contracting firms mean its member cities get the most for their money by paying the expense upfront now rather than piecemeal later.

And so HRSD — like similar agencies in Lynchburg, Richmond and up and down every major Chesapeake tributary — has work to do. Old sewage systems need repairs to prevent leaks of feces into rivers and streams during storms. Pipes need replacement. Treatment facilities need upgrades.

In Hampton Roads, as elsewhere, it will all cost a ton of money. HRSD deserves scrutiny as it spends our dollars. But the unavoidable fact is that the region's sewer systems need to be improved, and that work will cost money.

No matter how outraged the politicians get.