

Fix for sewage pipes in the pipeline – with fees

Hampton Roads and the EPA are butting heads. The result will be sewage upgrades – and increased rates.

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June 19, 2007

Cities and counties in Hampton Roads are finalizing a plan to upgrade sewer pipes in order to meet a federal mandate that will cost at least \$50 million over the next few years.

The Environmental Protection Agency mandate calls for finding and correcting faults in sewer systems that cause sewage to overflow during periods of heavy rain. The federal agency made it a nationwide priority in 2004, and the Hampton Roads Sanitation District's deadline to provide a plan of attack is October 2007.

So while the region is not being singled out - in fact, HRSD's pipes are in better shape than those in many major metro areas - the fix could still cost more than \$100 million and command a great deal of time from public works departments.

"It'll definitely have an effect on rates," said Reed Fowler, Newport News' director of public works. "It's real hard to say how much. It definitely would have a mild to significant effect on rates."

The sewage-fee increases come at a time when area residents already will be paying new or higher auto-related fees and taxes to finance transportation projects and after years of rising real estate values and rising property taxes.

It's not clear exactly how much the sewer work will cost, because the cities and counties that are a part of HRSD still need to survey the region's network of pipes and pump stations, a task that will take five to seven years.

Severe problems will be fixed immediately. Once problems are catalogued, the cost will come into sharper focus, said Ted Henifin, HRSD's general manager. But he put the early estimate just for that five- to seven-year study period at \$50 million to \$100 million.

There is still a dispute with the EPA over how the work should be done. HRSD and its 13 member localities have put together a plan that would allow the whole region to assess how best to spend money and correct problems.

The EPA has said it favors a more individual approach by the localities, saying that's how it's been done everywhere else, Henifin said.

"If everyone did their own thing, without thinking what others were doing, a lot of regional money would be wasted," Henifin said.

Technically, each locality is responsible for its own sewage infrastructure, and HRSD manages the larger infrastructure that delivers sewage to HRSD treatment plants.

The EPA has made its position clear. But so have HRSD and the localities. City councils and boards of supervisors are approving the draft plan right now, with the hope that the State Water Control Board will approve it in September - just before the deadline and, local officials hope, to the EPA's pleasure.

"We're sure this is what we need to do to address the problem," Henifin said.

HRSD processes about 160 million gallons of wastewater per day, Henifin said. The most recent data for how much and how often sewage overflows in Hampton Roads was not available Monday.

But in 2003, a year when Hurricane Isabel caused large overflows, 13.2 million gallons overflowed during the course of the year.

Clogs from substances such as grease cause some overflows. But mostly it happens when heavy rains find their way into cracked sewer pipes and overload the system. Then the lowest-lying manhole becomes the discharge point.