

Loan for Portsmouth, grant for HRSD in proposed House budget

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Proposed budgets from the House of Delegates and the state Senate came out over the weekend and the major headlines, announced in January, were a proposed 3-percent raise for state employees and better pay for state police.

But two items in the House budget may stick out for Hampton Roads.

One is a \$1.4 million grant to reimburse the Hampton Roads Sanitation District for an extensometer. That's a device used to measure the subsidence or sinking of land in the region. It's a key tool in measuring the effects of relative sea level rise.

Another is a \$5.1 million loan over three years to help Portsmouth with cash flow. The city lost property tax revenues after the Virginia International Gateway port facility property changed from private to state ownership as part of its renegotiated lease.

It doesn't appear that either proposal is in the Senate budget.

The two chambers confer to come up with one spending plan, which must be done by Feb. 15.

It then goes to Gov. Terry McAuliffe, who can veto any part of it.

Extensometer

The HRSD is putting the finishing touches on a 2,000-foot hole where pipe and an extensometer are installed at the Nansemond Treatment Plant in Suffolk.

The state grant pays them back for that device, which measures how much the land is rising or sinking.

About half of the relative sea level rise in Hampton Roads is caused by gradual land sinking due mostly to businesses and residents pumping water out of the ground.

Decades ago the area had two extensometers that measured one to 4 millimeters of subsidence a year, but that data collection stopped because of a lack of money.

A renewed focus on the devastating effect sea level rise could have on Hampton Roads has led to restarting the measurements.

Sinking land floods more easily.

More than 176,000 residents could be displaced if the land drops 3 feet or more, according to the Hampton Roads Planning District Commission.

Hampton Roads could subside 5 feet by 2100, according to the Center for Sea Level Rise at Old Do-

minion University.

HRSD wants to slow subsidence, and maybe even reverse it, by injecting treated wastewater into the region's main aquifer, eventually at a clip of 120 million gallons a day – more than enough to fill up the Rose Bowl each day.

HRSD has been taking wastewater from toilets and sinks and treating it to the point where it's drinkable again. Ted Henifin, HRSD's general manager, famously drank the treated water at a media event last year.

The agency plans to spend \$1 billion by 2030 converting seven of its plants into aquifer-replenishment centers, if the demonstration at the Nansemond facility goes well.

Port loan

The treasury loan for lost port property tax comes after Portsmouth officials were frustrated with the state's recently signed, nearly 50-year deal to lease the privately owned Virginia International Gateway.

The city is set to lose out on \$3.3 million in tax revenue over the next three years because \$64 million in assets at the Virginia International Gateway property will come off the tax rolls.

City officials said last year they can't afford to lose that money and suggested it could hurt its public safety and education budgets.

The state, through the Virginia Department of Transportation, would loan Portsmouth \$1.7 million a year, allowing the city to not miss out on tax revenue.

Planned expansion of the port will include buying expensive cranes under the private side, which will bring a big increase in property tax revenue that will enable Portsmouth to repay the state loan.

State Sen. Louise Lucas, D-Portsmouth, also had proposed a bill that would create two funds to help struggling port cities. One fund would go to economic development, the other to transportation projects heavily used by the ports.

The bill passed the Senate 28-11. The House will take up Senate bills starting this week.

While the idea to create the funds may be an easy sell, finding money to fill them isn't.

It doesn't appear either chamber's proposed budgets include appropriations for those funds.

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