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Combined Sewers - A Major Flaw in Local Pollution Abatement Plans*

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Local Pollution Abatement Plans

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Summary

Every time it rains on the city, nearly all of Rochester's raw sewage spills into the Genesee River and Irondequoit Bay because the present sewer system cannot handle the load.

In March the State Health Department approved an engineering plan to put an end to this problem.

But the State Health Department refuses to give Rochester money to help pay for improving the sewers on the mistaken excuse that the city is trying to rebuild its sewer system.

The State Health Department decision, coming at a time when the plans for the city's Durand-Eastman Sewage Treatment Plant are about to be put into operation, could jeopardize Rochester's entire program for cleaning up the Genesee River.

Background

About 80 per cent of the city area is served by an antiquated sewage system. Combined storm and sanitary sewage flows along one set of pipes and tunnels.

In dry weather about 95 per cent of the city sewage flows along the pipes to the Durand-Eastman Sewage Treatment Plant (1).

The other 5 per cent overflows along some 40 overflow pipes into the Genesee River and Irondequoit Bay -- raw human and industrial sewage, cyanide, fecal matter, grease balls.

In wet weather -- rain storms, spring thaw -- the situation is reversed. Some 95 per cent of the city sewage flows with the storm run-off water along the overflow pipes into the Genesee River and Irondequoit Bay.

Monroe County Pure Waters Agency has pointed to the city's storm sewer overflows as "the second most important contributor to the pollution of the lower river".

When Eastman Kodak Company completes its secondary sewage treatment plant in August, the city will be left as the biggest violator of pollution standards in this county.

The city commissioned Black and Veatch, consulting engineers of Kansas City, Missouri, to make a study of this overflow problem in February, 1968.

(1) This estimate was given in Monroe County Pure Waters report and master plan.

Their report, suggesting alternatives for ending the problem, was sent to the city manager last summer. It was approved by the State Health Department in March.

The 120 million dollar project recommended by Black and Veatch and approved by the State Health Department would remodel the sewer system.

It would keep the storm and sanitary sewers as a combined system -- saying it is too expensive to separate them -- but would add eight catchment tanks under the city.

These would hold all storm water and sewage in all but the heaviest "two-year" frequency rain storms. In the tanks the water would be chlorinated in case part of it did spill along the overflow pipes. But most of the stormwater-sewage effluent would be retained until the storm subsided and the effluent could flow along for treatment at the Durand Eastman plant.

Some new sewer lines would be needed, along with a regrading of some lines, but it would be essentially the same sewer system we have now with eight catchment tanks added and chlorination. These tanks are sewage treatment devices.

An alternative, considered and rejected by the engineers and the state, would be to separate the storm and sanitary sewers. But this would cost 750 million dollars, take 20 years to complete and would mean tearing up a major part of the city and demolishing some of the oldest buildings.

#### Recent Interviews

G. Richard Sutherland, director of Monroe County Pure Waters Agency, told a water pollution seminar March 25 that Rochester may well have to pay the whole \$120 million bill out of city funds without substantial state and federal aid to which the city is entitled.

At the seminar, organized by Rochester Institute of Technology to tell business officials about local water pollution problems, Sutherland said that the city is entitled to up to 60 per cent state and federal aid to help pay the massive bill.

"But there doesn't look like there is enough money available in state and federal aid," Sutherland said.

He said the work on the project could not be started "until the aid problem is sorted out."

Sutherland said it had not been decided whether the project would be started with simple approval of the city council or by first holding a city-wide referendum.

If Rochester has to pay the full bill alone, Sutherland estimated it would cost each household in the city 35 dollars a year on their tax bill.

If the city gets 60 per cent aid, it would cost about 10 dollars a year, he estimated.

"I don't want to have to go to people in the city and tell them they will have to pay the full amount when communities around here are getting up to 60 per cent aid", Sutherland said.

"I do not know what kind of solution we are going to find yet. We are keeping pressure on cleaning up raw sewage and industrial wastes. We do not want to get involved in this (Rochester's stormwater overflow problem) but we must lay plans now so we can get to it in the next two or three years", he said.

"It's a tough one. Monroe County and Rochester deserve a great deal of credit for the way they have gone about this", Metzler said.

### Discussion

R.C.S.I., since the very first report on sewage in the Genesee River in October, 1964, has emphasized that the spill over of raw sewage and human fecal matter is a major source of pollution to the Genesee River and to Irondequoit Bay.

The State Health Department, in refusing funds to help pay part of the city bill to clean up the river and bay, is reverting to its old attitude. It appears to us that this department is saying that the county, city and state are doing all they can to clean up the river and bay and that is enough. The state is now telling the city that because there is no money in state funds the state can do nothing about raw sewage pouring into the river and bay. It is leaving it to a city, fraught with other budgetary problems, to sort out its own mess.

The state will pay out large amounts of money for elaborate secondary sewage treatment plants and for new interceptor sewer systems to criss-cross this and other counties. But the state is refusing to allocate a penny to solve the simple problem of intercepting spills into the river and bay from the antiquated combined sewer system.

This decision, in effect, penalizes Rochester for being the leader in cleaning up our waters, and it rewards, once again, cities like Albany and Utica which spend very little money on sewage control, hence are "encouraged" to build new facilities with state money.

The excuse given by the state is that Rochester is "separating" its combined sewer system. R.C.S.I. believes this is contrary to fact. The proposed plan does not separate storm and sanitary sewage. Rather, it provides a mechanism by which raw sewage will reach the Durand Eastman treatment plant rather than being dumped, untreated, into our waters. In essence, all Rochester is proposing to do is build a sewer where one is missing.

Why should the city -- with state aid -- build a \$48 million secondary treatment plant with phosphate removal in Durand Eastman Park if much of the city's sewage is not going to be carried to it during wet weather?