EPA asks how C-P to fund improvements

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Federal environmental officials want to know by March 11 how the city-parish intends to finance an additional $35 million in sewerage improvements.

If local officials fail to provide the information soon, the city-parish risks fines of an unknown amount, according to the latest letter from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s regional office in Dallas.

The problem: local officials do not know yet how they are going to finance the additional sewer system improvements about which the EPA is breathing down their necks, according to Public Works Director Bill Howe.

Mayor Pat Screeen has ruled out an increase in the sewer user fee as a way to provide additional financing, Howe said, and the only other way to raise that much money would appear to be through a property tax-financed bond issue.

“Maybe all we can do is put it on the ballot and let the people decide,” Howe said. “If the voters won’t approve it, then they’ll just start fining us, I guess, and then we’ll have to come up with a way to pay them.”

Even if the public would be inclined to approve such a bond issue, it will be several months before Howe will know what the size of the issue would have to be, he said. If the public is to be presented with a bond issue, the city-parish might as well make it large enough to finance all that needs to be done to the sewerage system, he said.

Existing revenues are being used to make EPA-mandated improvements at the north and south treatment plants, but the pricetag on what remains to be done could be more than $151 million or less than $33 million — depending on several variables.

The latest letter from the EPA gives the city-parish until March 11 to provide the agency’s Dallas office with a schedule of construction for the north treatment plant and “describe in detail how construction at the north and south plants and the extensive sewer line rehabilitation and modification is going to be financed.”

Construction schedules can be provided easily enough, Howe said, and the city-parish already knows how it will finance the more than $60 million in improvements to the two treatment plants. The Metro Council already has authorized the sale of the bonds, which have not been sold yet because of unsuccessful negotiations to turn the operation and upgrading of the plants over to private business.

But as of Sunday, the Screen administration had made no decision on how to finance other phases of work, estimated to cost about $35 million, that would eliminate rainwater infiltration, overflows and bypasses.

Part of that work involves repairing leaky sewer lines and preventing untreated sewage from flowing out of malfunctioning pumping stations and into drainage canals, Howe said.

The cost of those construction phases could be reduced once the DPW staff identifies all the points at which the storm sewers and sanitary sewers can exchange water.

When the existing systems were built years ago, the city-parish provided built-in protection against sewage backing up into people’s homes by allowing for overflow into storm sewers, Howe said.

Federal law now forbids such overflows.

The overflow points create another problem, Howe said.

They allow rainwater from flooded storm sewers to overflow into the sewer lines, sending the treatment plants more water than they can handle and requiring that the plants be bypassed to prevent sewage from backing into people’s homes.

Federal law now forbids such bypasses.

The problems of overflows and bypasses could be considerably reduced — and the cost of upgrading the system along with them — if those connection points were plugged up with concrete, Howe said. His staff is studying the situation, but the staff has not come back with cost estimates yet, he said.

Preventing the overflow of rainwater from storm sewers into sanitary sewers probably will cause drainage problems, as storm sewers fill up faster than they do now and back up

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into the street.

“We’re going to have some kind of a problem no matter what we do,” Howe said.

In any event, once the overflow and bypass problem is solved, the city-parish still will be left with about $110 million worth of work to do — unless an experiment with a ring lace treatment system proves successful.

If the ring lace system works as well as its proponents claim it does, that $110 million pricetag could drop to $18 million.

The city-parish has asked EPA for a grant to cover the bulk of the cost of a $300,000 experiment with the process. By providing a home for sewage eating microorganisms, ring lace could expand the quantity and quality of the treatment capacities of more than 100 small package treatment plants that serve the residential subdivisions that sprung up outside the city in the 1970s.

DPW would like to install the system in two such plants in the Central area. Howe said that if all goes according to plan, he should know by mid-July if the system works as well as its proponents claim it does.