McHugh bows out after 12 years

Six candidates running for BR mayor's position

By DEANNE SMITH
Advocate staff writer

As Mayor Tom Ed McHugh prepares to step down after running the city-parish government for 12 years, he says his successor's time will be taken up dealing with traditional municipal government problems.

McHugh said possibly the biggest challenge facing his successor is upgrading the sewer system to meet federal clean-water regulations.

"The sewer system is the huge issue that will stay on the agenda for probably the next 15, 20 years," McHugh said. "It's a big-ticket issue and a very complex issue."

McHugh steps down Dec. 31. His successor will be chosen in fall elections. All 12 seats on the Metro Council, the legislative body in the municipal government, also will be decided in fall elections.

Those running to replace McHugh are: state Rep. Melvin "Kip" Holden, an attorney; Councilwoman Roxson Welch, an attorney; Baker Mayor Bobby Simpson; Baton Rouge Business Report owner Rolfe McCollister; financial consultant Fred Dent Jr., a spokesperson for the public group Tax Busters; and Donna Mayeux, a lobbyist and member of the Baton Rouge Area Convention and Visitors Commission.

Holden and Mayeux are Democrats and the others are Republicans.

Most of the candidates have said they would make improving the parish public schools their top priority.

However, McHugh said his successor won't have much time to spend on the schools. The mayor has no authority over the public schools, which are run by an elected board.

McHugh said the next mayor can help the school system, but will not have much say in trying to resolve the long-running school desegregation lawsuit pending in federal court.

The mayoral candidates "can certainly provide more involvement and more leadership. I think, in all honesty, the school system, the judge and the Justice Department is where this will be resolved," McHugh said.

He said one of the biggest tasks will be helping the council select a plan to upgrade the sewer system to eliminate sewage backups and overflows during heavy rain.

The city-parish has drafted seven upgrade possibilities. The least expensive would cost $329 million and the most expensive would cost $467 million.

Sewer fees were raised on average by one-third in January to help pay for the improvements, which must be finished in 10 years.

The council has agreed to two more fee increases that would almost double the average sewer fee from its 1999 level.

The average monthly sewer bill in 1999 was $13.29. Now it is $17.50 and is projected to increase to $25.92 in 2002.

The council also agreed to ask voters to reallocate up to 70 percent of a half-cent sales tax that now pays for road improvements.

The reallocated portion could go toward the sewer program before the tax expires June 30, 2002.

The city-parish already has a half-cent sales tax for sewer improvements.

If the road tax is not reallocated, the average sewer bill could go up to $34.69 in 2002.

McHugh said the city-parish has a good shot at getting the federal government to extend the sewer upgrade deadline to 15 years from 10 years.

If that happens and the city-parish gets significant federal funding for the upgrade — up to $100 million might become available — none of the road tax would be needed for sewer improvements.

The road tax is now divided so that 60 percent funds construction of 10 new roads approved by voters in 1997, and 40 percent funds repairs to existing roads.

The next mayor might have less money to spend on public programs as a result of slumping sales tax revenue. Effective July 1, McHugh cut about $7 million from the municipal government's $490 million budget because of the slowdown.

Sales tax receipts had increased for several years, but last year the growth began to slow and for the first three months this year, sales and use tax receipts were $29.06 million, down from $29.49 million for the same period last year.

The city-parish has a total 2002 spending plan of about $490 million, of which $216 million is in the general fund. Sales taxes are budgeted to fund 58 percent of the general fund.

The city-parish levies a 3 percent sales tax — 2 percent goes into the general fund and 1 percent is dedicated for road and sewer improvements. Food and prescription drugs are exempt from the penny tax split for road and sewers.

Based on current sales tax collections, McHugh says another 2 percent in cuts will be needed for the 2001 budget.

McHugh said the next mayor also will continue to grapple with possible sanctions by the federal government for violating Clean Air Act standards for smog or low-level ozone.

"The next mayor will want to make sure they stay on one step ahead of that problem," he said.

Traffic and crime are recurring city-parish problems that the next mayor will face, but they aren't as worrisome as they were several years ago, McHugh said.

"I think we are in better shape than we have been in quite some time," he said.

The next mayor and council also must find more money to operate increasingly costly court systems and increasing health-care premiums.

"There will be no lack of challenges," McHugh said.