

Hearing questions reasons to raise Jeffco sewer rates

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Environmentalists and residents at a public hearing Thursday criticized a proposed sewer rate increase, saying ratepayers are unfairly subsidizing over-the-mountain development rather than fixing Jefferson County's broken sewer system.

"I don't see no sense in us having to foot the bill for new growth," said Dempsey Woody Jr. of North Birmingham. "We need to use the money to fix up our own house before we worry about anything else."

Beth Stewart, executive director of the Cahaba River Society, said her group has supported past sewer rate hikes, which subsidize the costly repairs needed to keep sewer systems from dumping untreated sewage into area waterways.

But she said the Society couldn't support new increases because "there are too many unanswered questions about the high cost of the sewer repairs."

For instance, some county repair estimates submitted to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency for approval show that the county must complete \$818 million in court-ordered projects. Another county report estimates the projects all total \$1.97 billion.

Ratepayers are also paying for nearly \$900 million in other sewer projects not related to the 1996 court order, she said.

Among, she said them is the 17-mile sewer line being tunneled underground. Proposed plans call for the \$141 million sewer line to cross at 15 separate points under the Cahaba River, a source of drinking water for a fourth of the state's population.

The Cahaba River Society and other groups are also worried that the sewer will spur too much development in the ecologically fragile river basin.

"Despite our unwavering support for the county's sewer repair program, the Society urges the County Commission to answer questions and provide more information to the public about this massive sewer capital program and justify the absolute necessity of these rate increases before you act on them," Ms. Stewart said.

An automatic rate increase of 10 percent went into effect Jan. 1. But the commission's financial advisers have said the rate needs to be increased another 10 percent on April 1 in order to finance a \$275 million bond issue. The commission will vote on the bond issue and the rate hike next week.

As of Jan. 1, the average residential sewer bill, based on the average usage of water, went from \$21.08 to \$23.29 a month. If the commission passes the proposed sewer rate increase, the rate would rise to about \$25.60 a month.

Some speakers Thursday - including county employees and sewer engineers - praised the county for taking over every municipal sewer system in the county and instituting an aggressive program to fix sewer lines and treatment plants.

Others like Denise LeCroy, president of the Committee for the Preservation of Lake Purdy, said the county undertook the sewer and the rate hikes without public notification or review. But Commission President Gary White said the county did hold a number of public hearings about the sewer line about nine years ago.

He also said the public can make written comments to the commission before Tuesday's vote.

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