

Sewage plant deadline, costs spur concern



Fred Thalmann, superintendent of the joint Madison and Chatham sewer plant, sits outside the facility described as in need of repair

By LAWRENCE HACKETT

Concerns in Madison and Chatham about the escalating cost of improvements to their joint sewer plant are spreading to other towns statewide, where officials fear that a combination of state deadlines and basic economics will spur soaring construction costs.

"We're not arguing with them whether we ought to have clean water. We ought to have clean water," Madison Mayor Ralph Engelsman said. "But we're faced now with circumstances nobody really thought of before."

The problem, local officials say, is a textbook example of supply and demand. After signing agreements with the state Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), more than 120 towns and sewerage authorities must begin sewer system improvements in the next several months or face growing fines. Many already have paid fines for missing a federal deadline for sewerage improvements.

But according to local officials and their engineers, there are fewer than 20 general contractors in the region capable of completing the work. That sort of mismatch is bound to cause problems unless the DEP eases the terms of its consent orders, local officials said.

Most officials fear that bids will come in sharply higher than municipal estimates. Others say contract language that calls for builders to pay fines if they do not finish on time could leave some municipalities with no bidders at all.

So far, the DEP does not seem sympathetic.

"Their own individual citizens

have been clamoring... that they wanted the water cleaned up, and that the DEP hadn't been tough enough in getting it done," said Joseph Mikulka, the DEP's northern region enforcement chief for the department's Division of Water Resources. "The handwriting has been on the wall for quite a while now."

Mikulka said municipalities had many years to do the improvements needed to comply with the federal Clean Water Act of the early 1970s. Many did nothing, and only began to move after it was clear that many would not meet the government's July 1988 deadline.

While admitting that "it seems to be a situation whereby it's a seller's market," Mikulka said the consent orders clearly state that work must begin "regardless of cost." If prices rocket upward, he said, "well, that's just the way it goes and that's part of the price of being in noncompliance on July 1, 1988."

Some municipalities already have been stung by the rising prices. In Hoboken, for example, sewer improvements were estimated at \$62 million, the lone bid received was for \$115 million. City officials have split the project into two sections and are awaiting new bids, according to DEP figures.

Nutley tightens zoning rule for building lots

A new residential zone aimed at discouraging small-lot development was approved last night by the Nutley Board of Commissioners.

The new R-1AA zone establishes 7,000 square foot minimum lot sizes, with 70 feet minimum frontage. Previously, the most restrictive zone called for 6,000 square foot minimum lots with 60 feet minimum frontage.

Finance Commissioner Walter Smith, who sponsored the ordinance, said the measure was designed to discourage the division of large real estate parcels into small building lots. An estimated 10 percent of Nutley's land is undeveloped.

"During the spring municipal election campaign, one of the major concerns expressed by voters was over development of our community," Smith said. "The step we have taken tonight will go a long way toward protecting Nutley

as a residential town."

The areas primarily affected by the new zone will be sections of Prospect Street and portions of the Spring Gardens and Nutley Park residential areas.

"I support this law and so do most of my neighbors," said Jacqueline Imhoff, a Rutgers Place resident. "We commend you for this measure."

In a related matter, the board introduced an ordinance which would bring subdivision regulations into conformance with state land use legislation. A public hearing on the measure is set for Nov. 1.

In other business, Public Works Commissioner Peter Scarpelli was given preliminary approval to create a position for a roads supervisor. Scarpelli also plans to upgrade a part-time clerk to full-time and promote a sewer department foreman to supervisor. A public hearing on a salary ordinance covering these changes also will be held Nov. 1.

Body found near entrance to cemetery in Orange

The body of a man in his early to mid 60s was found yesterday near the entranceway of a church cemetery at Main Street and Scotland Road, according to Orange Police Director Charles Cobbett.

The police director identified the dead man as William McKenna. Cobbett said the man had been homeless.

Officer Michael Crowley was on patrol, driving along Scotland Road about 8:25 a.m., when he noticed the body lying on the church grounds, Cobbett said.

Crowley notified police headquarters which dispatched an ambulance to the scene, he continued.

McKenna apparently had died overnight or late Monday evening, Cobbett said.

Cobbett said the Essex County Medical Examiner's Office is performing an autopsy.

He asked that anyone with information on McKenna or what might have happened to him should call Capt. Anthony Benevento or Detective Nicholas Liotti at the police department.

Orange grants pay raise to business administrator

Orange Business Administrator Thomas Morrison received a salary hike to \$65,000 from the city council last night.

Morrison took over as the city's business administrator on Sept. 8, after working for seven years as the vice president of the Bedford Stuyvesant Community Restoration Program in Brooklyn, N.Y.

In other business, the council adopted an ordinance prohibiting municipal attorney Michael Critchley from working more than 35 hours a week. Mayor Robert Brown said the

measure was necessary to cut down on overtime payments. The ordinance also sets a minimum of 21 hours that must be worked by an assistant city attorney.

The council also adopted an ordinance prohibiting the display of obscene material in retail stores visible to persons under age 18. The ordinance defines affected retail facilities as a store, newsstand, booth, concession or similar business with unimpeded access by persons under 18, and which is in the business of selling periodicals or other publications containing pictures, drawings or photographs.

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