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Mayor makes pitch for water-sewer rate hike

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Flanked by County Judge Robert Eckels and several City Council members, Mayor Bill White stood beside Buffalo Bayou on Friday and unveiled his plan to pay for flood-control work.

The gathering of city and county officials also served to indicate why White's approach appears to have brighter prospects for approval than Mayor Lee Brown's plan had last year: White invited people into the process early and got his political ducks in a row.

"I think it will make all the difference," Councilwoman Carol Alvarado said. "It's a very inclusive approach. Council members are partners in this plan; that makes it easier to go out and sell."

Alvarado admitted feeling some deja vu because White's plan is similar to Brown's - except that White is talking about increasing water and sewer rates, and Brown wanted to assess a drainage fee.

"The fact that we aren't going to have a fee is going to make it easier to sell to constituents," Alvarado said.

Houstonians haven't seen a water and sewer rate increase since 1993.

Under White's plan, the average residential customers would see a 9 percent increase in their water and sewer bills by July 1, which equates to an additional \$3.73 a month. Rates are expected to go up by about 2.5 percent annually in following years.

With the proposed increases, Houstonians would have the third-highest rates among major Texas cities. Several other cities charge residents and businesses an additional drainage fee, including Austin, Dallas, Fort Worth and San Antonio.

White's proposed rate hike would apply to businesses as well as residential consumers.

The increase, and a restructuring and refinancing of the water and sewer system's debt, are expected to allow the city to spend about \$150 million on storm-water drainage improvements over the next three years.

Next year alone, the plan calls for rebuilding undersized and aging storm sewer systems in Timbergrove, Garden Villas, Cambridge Village, the Texas Medical Center and along Little York Road in north Houston.

The work would include creating detention basins and installing larger sewer lines that can handle more runoff, city officials said.

White's proposal is an effort to jump-start the process with local money while the city pursues federal funds for projects beyond the three-year period.

His plan also is expected to provide \$30 million a year for maintenance and operation of the drainage system - work that includes sweeping gutters, washing sidewalks, cleaning storm sewers and manholes, mowing easements and regrading roadside ditches.

Brown, near the end of his six-year tenure as mayor, warned that a rate increase was inevitable after the council killed his drainage fee in December. The fee, which the council had approved in October, would have added about \$2 to the typical homeowner's monthly water bill.

It drew strong opposition, however, from critics who called it an illegal tax on churches, schools and governments. The county even sued the city last year to seek exemption from the fee.

"There's a fundamental difference," Eckels said of White's and Brown's plans. "The city would have been setting a precedent by putting a tax on a local government entity."

As he developed his plan, White got county leaders involved in the process.

"We are customers like everyone else. We believe the mayor will set rates on a rational basis. It's not a procedural problem for us," Eckels said. "I will not presume to guess about (how swiftly White's plan will be approved), but the mayor seems to have aligned support."

As Brown did, White is calling for creation of a dedicated source of funding for drainage projects.

The city previously used excess water and sewer money, in an account called the Any Lawful Purpose Fund, to pay for drainage. The council eliminated that fund last year, however.

The failure of Brown's plan left the city without money to pay for basic operation and maintenance of the system through the end of this fiscal year, which ends June 30. That money will run out in two weeks.

White said he will reallocate money in the Public Works and Engineering Department to get the city through the rest of the fiscal year.

Meanwhile, he plans to continue building consensus among council members for his proposal. White reiterated Friday that "pride in authorship" will not be a problem and he welcomes suggestions from officials and residents.

"Sometimes it seems like we are fighting a losing war, because flooding is getting worse and worse. But we cannot afford to do nothing," he said. "This is a step in the right direction. None of these investments are going to come cheap. We are not going to end all rain or end all floods, but we will make a noticeable improvement in neighborhoods."

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