

\$2.5 BILLION IN UPGRADES**Faster fix urged for sewer system****40 years to clean up rivers 'not typical'****By Mark Ferencsik**
THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Environmental groups want Columbus to move even faster to make pricey improvements to its sewer system, but that might cost ratepayers even more than the double-digit hikes they've been paying, the city says.

Columbus plans to complete most of its \$2.5 billion in improvements to reduce basement sewage backups and storm-sewer overflows into rivers by 2025, as part of a 40-year plan.

But the Central Ohio Sierra Club, Ohio Environmental Council and two other groups want the city to finish its plan in less time, saying that will clean up rivers sooner.

The Ohio Environmental Protection Agency has given preliminary approval to the city's plan. The state will hold a public hearing on that plan at 6 p.m. today at the Columbus Metropolitan Library's branch at 3540 S. High St., near the South Outerbelt.

The plan brings the city in compliance with two consent orders it signed with the state in 2002 and 2004.

Typically, cities are required

to complete sewer systems upgrades within 20 to 25 years, said Brandi Whetstone, an Ohio Sierra Club coordinator.

"We'd like to see Columbus close to that time," she said.

"It's not typical for a city to take 40 years."

But Columbus utilities spokesman Rick Tilton said the city wants to spread it out over 40 years to lessen the burden on ratepayers.

"To crunch it down to 20 years is far more expensive for ratepayers," he said.

Whetstone said her group is sensitive to that. She said it supports the low-income discount the city has for poor residents; the City Council soon will vote on raising that discount from 15 percent to 20 percent.

Columbus water and sewer customers pay 54 percent more for service now than they did four years ago, and they have suffered through double-digit rate hikes the past three years.

The city is working with federal legislators to try to secure federal funds to help pay for the improvements. Federal legislation that U.S. Sens. George V. Voinovich and Sherrod Brown introduced

Aug. 4 calls for \$1.8 billion in grants over five years for financially troubled cities.

It also would revise federal guidelines to determine how much cities and their residents can afford in paying for improvements.

The Ohio EPA is not interested in accelerating the city's plan. "They can't physically go faster," said Sheree Gossett-Johnson, a state environmental inspector.

The state is making sure that the city addresses the issues in the consent order in an appropriate time, she said.

The city's plan calls for Columbus to reduce overflows from 1.65 billion gallons per year to 250 million gallons by 2025. The state expects the city to complete much of its work by 2018, she said.

Written comments can be sent through next Tuesday to: Ohio EPA, Division of Surface Water, Attention: Permits Processing Unit, P.O. Box 1049, Columbus, OH 43216-1049.

Copies of the state's approval letter, proposed changes to the city's wastewater discharge permits and a fact sheet are available at www.epa.state.oh.us/dsw/cso/columbus_ltcp.html

mferencsik@dispatch.com