

Sewer improvements, higher fees a result of settlement

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HONOLULU (HawaiiNewsNow) - A landmark settlement regarding Honolulu's sewers means big improvements are coming down the pipe, but it will also mean rate increases to pay for what's estimated to be more than a billion dollars of work.

The lawsuits go back 16 years but today's bottom line is that all sides worked out their differences over sewage.

It's no secret Honolulu has had some major sewage problems, namely the spill that flushed 48 million raw gallons into the Ala Wai Canal in 2006. Add to that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency says Honolulu has been breaking environmental law by not treating sewage twice before dumping it into the ocean.

"It's smelly, it's confusing, it's chaotic, it gets in the way, it's stinky, people complain about it they want to know when it's going to end, when you're going to get it done," said Mufi Hannemann, Honolulu Mayor, during a press conference.

Honolulu is the largest city not to do secondary treatment. Hannemann maintains it's still not necessary and has resisted a settlement for years. But after spending \$10 million on legal fees the past few years the city is settling out of court. It has agreed to first fix the neglected collection system which is essentially everything from your home to the sewage facilities. Then upgrade the sewage plants to treat the waste twice before it's dumped into the ocean. The mayor previously estimated the secondary treatment would cost \$1.2 billion.

"We have tried and tried and tried to make the case that we are not doing any damage to the environment by not having to go to secondary treatment, but as much as we have done that we were hitting a brick wall," said Hannemann. "In my opinion this was a clear case of pay now or pay later."

Residents can expect to pay more in sewage fees. While specifics were not released rates may increase over time.

"We wanted to make sure we get aggressive action on behalf of citizens of Oahu and Hawaii but we also wanted to make sure the rates were fair," said Jared Blumenfeld, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. "Obviously the reason we care about coastal cities so much is because of the discharge to coastal waters and the impacts it could have on the ecosystem."

"Sewage spills are something that you take any public opinion poll and no one likes them but how we get at solving them is really what this proposed settlement is about."

The Sierra Club was one of the groups suing the city and is pleased the settlement is at hand.

"Honolulu has a history of way too many raw sewage spills being dumped into the ocean and nobody should have to swim in raw sewage," said Robert Harris, Sierra Club Hawaii Chapter. "From a person's perspective this means hopefully safer, cleaner water for them to enjoy all around Hawaii."

It will mean higher sewer rates and a lot of construction backups but in the end hopefully fewer sewer backups.

There is still paper work to finish up. The city council has to approve the plan which could be next month. Then there has to be a public comment period and the courts will approve the final settlement.

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