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OUR OPINION

Sewage system improvements cannot be put off

THE ISSUE

Mayor Hannemann has asked the public to lobby the EPA to continue exempting the city from the 1970 Clean Water Act.

HONOLULU residents should expect steep increases in sewer fees as the city finally faces up to the enormously expensive task of improving wastewater collection and treatment facilities.

Had the work been done in a timely manner in the decades past, the cost would not have been as jolting as it likely will be now. However, the failure of officials to take on unglamorous projects has left the city in the position of being compelled to do what it should have been doing all along and having to plead poverty to further excuse itself from long-standing legal obligations.

An agreement with the federal government, announced last week, will require the city to fix or replace six pressurized sewer lines and install backup lines for four of them because they present the greatest risks for catastrophic spills like the Beachwalk rupture that sent nearly 50 million gallons of raw sewage into the Ala Wai Canal last year.

The spill renewed the attention of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the state Department of Health to a 1995 consent decree under which the city had promised to make improvements in sewage collection.

The agreement, however, focuses on only some of the problems with the wastewater system. Treatment plant compliance with the 1970 Clean Water Act, for which the city has had waivers until this year, will be more extensive -- and more expensive.

The EPA told the city it had tentatively rescinded an exemption for its Honouliuli treatment plant and indicated it also could require upgrades to the Sand Island facility, Oahu's largest treatment plant.

Mayor Mufi Hannemann, already under budget constraints because of sewer system needs, has been urging residents to lobby against the EPA's cancellation of the waivers, contending that the primary level of wastewater treatment the city is doing is enough to safely pump into the ocean and that secondary treatment is unnecessary.

The mayor says plant upgrades would raise household sewer fees to \$300 a month to pay for the more than \$1 billion in improvements.

Hannemann should substantiate his figures to give ratepayers a firm estimate of costs so as not to unduly alarm the public. In addition, the mayor should focus his efforts on reaching a comprehensive plan that would include solutions for systemic problems and the matter of pending fines for the Beachwalk spill.

The city also should pursue federal aid, such as a grant program the U.S. House approved in March that would provide \$1.8 billion to cities and states for sewer system repairs. Meanwhile, Gov. Linda Lingle and state lawmakers should consider contributing funds to help the city. Even though sewers are the city's responsibility, funding would be appropriate because Honolulu serves as the state's economic hub and population center.

There's no denying that the sewage projects will be costly, but Hannemann will be doing the public a great service if he creates a long-term plan for improvements that would not be dependent on political whimsy. It would be a worthwhile investment in Honolulu's future.

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