

Portland reconsiders water-treatment plan

Another beneficial use of irradiation

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A city commissioner says suburban customers should pay 70 percent of the cost of a filtration system

Portland's suburban water customers will have to pick up most of the freight if a \$200 million filtration plant for Bull Run water is to go forward, Portland City Commissioner Dan Saltzman said.

A citizen panel endorsed the membrane filtration plant in 2002, even though it was the most expensive option to meet upcoming federal mandates on eliminating cryptosporidium from drinking water.

The panel liked the filters' ability to remove mud as well as the potentially lethal parasite. Mud in the water has shut down the Bull Run reservoirs near Mount Hood after heavy winter storms.

But Saltzman, under pressure to reduce climbing water rates, said last week that city ratepayers should not have to spend more than they would for the cheapest option: a \$60 million ultraviolet irradiation plant. Ultraviolet irradiation would kill the parasite but wouldn't remove mud from the water.

Suburban agencies that buy water from Portland stand to benefit the most from a filtration plant, Saltzman said. Filtering the water would expand Bull Run's capacity and address color problems that have generated the most complaints in the suburbs.

It could also remove mud created by construction of a third Bull Run dam, allowing for expansion of the system to accommodate suburban growth, Saltzman said.

"Our wholesale customers would have to step up to the plate at the outset," said Saltzman, who oversees the Water Bureau. "That's where a higher share of the demand would be."

The city's 19 suburban customers, including Gresham, Tigard and the Tualatin Valley Water District, use about 40 percent of the water from Portland's system. Saltzman's plan would require them to pick up at least 70 percent of the filtration plant's cost. Keeping increases in check. The proposal is part of Saltzman's effort to temper future

In the short term, the bureau's capital plan saves the most money by indefinitely deferring plans to build additional storage at the Powell Butte Nature Park, good news for park supporters.

The bureau will examine an alternative plan of putting an ultraviolet plant and new storage at Lusted Hill, on 98 acres owned by the Water Bureau in rural east Multnomah County.

That alternative would require land-use approval from the Metro regional government because Lusted Hill is outside the urban growth boundary, Saltzman said. If the plan isn't feasible, it would put the higher-cost projects -- and higher rates -- back on the table. Second-highest rates in U.S. Saltzman's moves are not enough to satisfy increasingly vocal business critics, who note that the city's combined water and sewer bills rank second-highest among big U.S. cities, behind Seattle.

Soaring sewer bills are the main reason for that ranking, though water bills have also been rising fast. Water Bureau efforts to increase security and the agency's plans to bury its Mount Tabor reservoirs are helping fuel higher rates.

Kent Craford, spokesman for a group of Portland businesses with heavy water use, said 7 percent annual increases aren't great news.

"Any decrease is welcome," Craford said. "But I think Portland's ratepayers, both residential and commercial, would much rather see water rate increases on par with inflation or lower."

Craford's group, the Portland Water Users Coalition, opposes membrane filtration as too costly and says its untried technology is too risky on such a large scale.

The Portland Utilities Review Board, established to look out for Portland ratepayers, has recommended the cheaper ultraviolet treatment.

The deadline for finishing the plant would probably be 2012, but it would need an eight- to nine-year construction lead time, bureau officials say.

The board of the Tualatin Valley Water District, Portland's biggest wholesale customer, favors membrane filtration. And Todd Heidgerken, the agency's government relations manager, said it makes sense for areas creating the new demand to pay more.

But he said expanding the system to take in more suburban customers would also help Portland spread out the costs of repairs and improvements to Bull Run, to the main transmission system and to the city's Columbia River well fields.