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Kerry Cavanaugh: Uncovering the dirty truth of sewer fee hikes

By Kerry Cavanaugh, Columnist
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Surprise! Nobody wants to raise taxes or fees.

That was the informal vote of attendees at the Daily News' town hall with Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa on Monday.

During the event, a Sherman Oaks woman railed against the proposed sewer service charge increase, which she said would hit senior citizens like her especially hard because there hasn't been a cost-of-living increase in Social Security payments in two years.

Villaraigosa sympathized with her and other residents feeling the financial pinch and said he'd warned Bureau of Sanitation leaders, "They're going to have to show us that there is no other alternative, like cutting."

We've heard that one before (water and power rate increases, stormwater fees, trash charges.) But this time, it may be hard to say no.

Sewers are one of those unseen but absolutely essential pieces of city infrastructure that demand consistent attention and funding. Los Angeles fell behind on sewer upgrades in the 1990s, leading to regular spills of raw sewage into basements and onto streets and beaches.

Environmental groups sued and the city eventually agreed to make \$2 billion worth of sewer upgrades by 2014. To start paying for repairs, the mayor and City Council enacted five, 7 percent sewer service charge increases, starting in 2005.

Interestingly, there wasn't a peep from the public about the sewer rate increase.

The most recent sewer increase was in January 2009. Then the Bureau of Sanitation decided to delay the next round of sewer fee hikes for a year or so with the hope that the economy would improve. That didn't exactly happen.

Now, Sanitation wants to roll out 10 years of sewer service charge increases, starting January 2012. The annual increases, ranging from 4.5 percent to 7.5 percent would take the typical single family home bill from \$30 a month to \$58 a month in 2020.

It's hard not to empathize with the Sherman Oaks woman who bemoaned higher sewer charges, when residents are already struggling with pricier gas, utility and food expenses. But infrastructure - like home maintenance - only gets more expensive the longer you postpone work.

Thirty percent of the city sewers are past their useful 80-year life. A sewer failure near the 110 Freeway and the L.A. River a few years ago cost \$17 million to handle. Regularly scheduled maintenance that might have prevented the failure would have cost \$2 million.

"We have to invest. Otherwise we will pay 10 times more in penalties and failures," said Adel Hagekhalil, assistant director of Sanitation. "We don't want to go back to what we saw in 1998 where we had sewage back up in front of schools in South L.A."

No, we don't.

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