

Painesville considers water fee

NH 4-12-11



Max Reinhart
MReinhart@News-Herald.com

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A recent study of the city of Painesville's water distribution system revealed the city has a multi-million dollar problem.

At a work session held Monday evening, city officials determined that since those kinds of funds — as much as \$15 million to fix all the problems — aren't available in the city budget, Council may

have to look to taxpayers to foot the bill.

Concerns about the water lines, some of which are more than 90 years old, began in February when some Elm Street residents reported rust showing up in their tap water.

City officials have worked on the prob-

lem in hopes of alleviating the concerns of not just Elm Street residents but anyone who lives along the 130 miles of water lines that, according to the study, need replaced.

"Right now, from where these people are sitting, this is an emergency," Councilman Andrew Flock said.

While city officials had originally hoped to find room in the budget for additional water system upgrades, Director of Finance Andy Unetic said the city already has scrimped about as much as possible.

"All our departments have done such a good job of scaling back," Unetic said. "(The money) is just not there to be cut."

Making matters worse is the water department's \$1.2 million debt the city

has already incurred via improvements to its water treatment plant.

At the work session, Council President Joe Hada said although it will be unpopular, the best solution might be a capital improvement fee, which would be tacked onto city water customers' monthly bills to pay for fixing the various problems with the distribution system during a number of years.

"We wouldn't be doing our job if we

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didn't look at a comprehensive approach," he said.

In addition to water quality, water pressure is an issue.

Painesville Fire Chief Mark Mlachak also was at the meeting and said that on some commercial streets, fire hydrant pressure is bad enough that it would affect the department's ability to successfully fight a fire.

He said because those streets are difficult for a water tanker to access, the added problem of low hydrant pressure could potentially be a dangerous one.

McMahon called attention to a portion of the study relating to the water lines' C-Factors, which measure water pressure.

On a scale in which a rating of "zero" is no pressure and "100" is ideal, McMahon said some city lines had C-Factors as low as 16.

Former City Water Supervisor Dan McGannon, who recently took a position with the city of Lorain, advised Council to replace

the city's water intake line in addition to the other work to be done.

He said that if the intake system fails, any other improvements would be rendered useless.

"How much water can you pump through an empty line?" McGannon said. "None."

McMahon said that between public hearings and the planning and bidding processes, the soonest that physical work could begin on the project is likely October.

Public hearings on the potential new fee are expected to be held in the weeks and months to come as city officials work on drafting legislation and project details.

While Council has not yet approved any capital improvement fees, McMahon said it would take an estimated \$7 per customer per month to pay for the necessary improvements.

"We've got to make sure that whatever we do provides us enough funding to get this job done," Hada said.

"It's something that affects everyone."