

Friday, March 7, 2014

The Plain Dealer | cleveland.com

*A11

Pollution solutions

Discussion heated on sewer tunnels, green alternatives

LEILA ATASSI
latassi@cleveland.com

A cleveland.com roundtable discussion Tuesday on the regional sewer district's \$3 billion tunnel project gave rise to a sometimes heated debate over whether the district has given adequate consideration to the potentially cheaper, greener alternatives to tunnels.

Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District Executive Director Julius Ciaccia, Terry Schwarz, director of Kent State University's Cleveland Urban Design Collaborative, and Middleburg Heights Mayor Gary Starr, who recently retired from the sewer board after nearly three decades of service, joined Northeast Ohio Media Group reporters Andrew Tobias and Leila

Atassi in the NEOMG studio, capping three weeks of coverage on the issue.

The tunneling project is a federally mandated plan to significantly reduce the amount of untreated sewage and water that overflows the district's combined sewer system after heavy rains and spills into local waterways. The idea is that the enormous tunnels would act as reservoirs beneath the existing sewer system, to capture the overflow until it can be pumped back up to the surface for treatment.

But some officials in other major cities say they're embracing a cheaper, greener way to address the issue. They say they're saving their ratepayers millions, if not billions, of dollars by using water retention features above ground

that can stop storm water from entering the sewer system in the first place.

Tempers flared during the roundtable Tuesday, when Starr accused Ciaccia of trying to muffle public debate on the topic, holding only a handful of public meetings on the tunnel plan before the board voted to increase sewer rates to pay for it.

Starr said he had called for a moratorium on the issue, hoping to gain more time to consider alternatives and to give the public a greater say. But the district already had made up its mind on the preferred technology, Starr said. Even urban planning and land reuse experts, such as Schwarz, were cut out of the discussion when the district let its vacant land steering committee fizzle.

Starr referred to a list of 17 potential community planning partners who could have made worthwhile contributions to the debate but were never given the chance.

Ciaccia countered that Starr requested the moratorium simply to stall, rather than to explore green alternatives. And stalling only would have led to increased construction costs in the long run. The federal consent decree negotiation process didn't grant the district the luxury of holding a year's worth of public meetings, Ciaccia said.

He apologized for letting the vacant land steering committee wither, rather than use it for its designed purpose to advise the district on which properties could work best for the handful of green

projects that are required by the consent decree.

Ciaccia said that the combined sewer overflow program is still in relative infancy, with more than two decades ahead to realize its goals. The consent decree offers enough flexibility to change course and choose green infrastructure at any point, if studies demonstrate that it would more cost-effectively achieve the same objective, he said.

Ciaccia acknowledged that the key question is how aggressively the district will pursue such alternatives.

Schwarz said that she was disappointed when the steering committee stopped meeting after an initial gathering in 2012. And she said that with as many as 15,000 vacant parcels in the city, the time

is right for the district to find ways to downsize or eliminate tunnels in exchange for building green infrastructure that would improve the overall aesthetic of some of Cleveland's most blighted neighborhoods, particularly those on the city's East Side.

She pointed to St. Louis, where sewer officials have proposed to do just that — undergoing a five-year pilot project to use some of the money collected from ratepayers for demolition and transforming one of the city's most desolate neighborhoods into one of its lushest, while managing storm water.

Schwarz said it's not too late for a public debate on the issue and for the sewer district to explore the possibilities in earnest. Ciaccia pledged to do so.