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EDITOR'S DESK

Guest Editorial:

FEDERAL GRANT PROGRAM MERITS SUPPORT OF WASTEWATER INDUSTRY

Federally mandated upgrades to wastewater collection systems and treatment plants that do not comply with clean water standards are placing a heavy financial burden on America's cities and counties. Homeowners are rebelling at the high cost of compliance, which is being passed on to them in the form of rate hikes. In some locations, municipal officials say economic growth is on hold because high tap-in fees are driving away new business.

Now, help may be on the way. Bipartisan legislation has been introduced in the House of Representatives that would ease the burden. The bill, HR 828, has been passed by the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee and awaits action on the floor of the House. HR 828 is a revised version of a bill sponsored by the CSO Partnership and includes portions of a previous bill, HR 3570, that was supported by the Association of Metropolitan Sewerage Agencies (AMSA) as well as other organizations.

The bill will codify the Combined Sewer Overflow Control policy to provide affected communities with clear direction and to provide CSO water-quality standards guidance. It also will provide \$45 million in technical assistance and grants for pilot projects in Watershed Management of Wet Weather Discharges and Stormwater Best Management Practices over a three-year period.

Under HR 828, EPA is authorized to make grants covering not less than 55 percent of the cost to plan, design and construct facilities to intercept, transport, control or treat municipal combined sewer overflow (CSOs) and sanitary sewer overflow (SSOs). A total of \$1.5 billion has been made available for such grants through 2002 and 2003. The bill further requires EPA to report to Congress on the cost to local governments and the effectiveness of CSO and SSO reduction on the environment and human health and to transfer technology in these fields to local governments.

Reps. Steven LaTourette (R-Ohio) and William Pascrell (D-NJ), who had introduced HR 3570, said they were pleased that several important components of their bill are included in the new one. While not as comprehensive as the earlier bill, HR 828 is clearly a step in the right direction. HR 3570 had proposed \$3 billion—twice as much as HR 328—in federal

grants. In addition, it would have clarified SSO requirements and used the criteria of best Stormwater Management Practices instead of imposing numerical discharge standards.

States and municipal governments desperately need information on the direction EPA will take on the SSO policy, which is still in limbo. The 1996 Clean Water Needs Survey estimated a 20-year total of \$44 billion to solve treatment and capacity and \$10 billion to solve SSO problems on the public portion of the sewer system. In 1999, EPA revised the SSO estimate to \$82 billion. No cost was developed for the private house laterals, which typically account for 40–60 percent of infiltration and inflow of clean water into the sewer system.

Cities with combined sewers require an estimated \$45 billion to construct necessary improvements. Together, these needs would total some \$200 billion. The possibility that these costs are substantially understated makes the bill's allocation appear even more minimal.

The SSO policy and Capacity Assurance Management Operation and Maintenance (CMOM) provisions, while regarded by many as a desirable goal, will have a substantial impact on rates. Communities will be required to introduce collection system improvements but have not been given direction as to the level of service or, in the case of satellite communities, even who will provide the direction. Regional authorities that offer treatment but leave the collection up to the satellite governments have concerns about the responsibility of being the enforcer. In addition to the issues of capacity and performance, they are concerned about the possibility of legal costs as well.

HR 828 is a start, but it is a short-term solution. Congress needs to conduct further efforts to focus on the needs for clean water funding, to achieve national consistency in regulating urban wet-weather flows and to finalize the SSO policy. The funds provided are paltry compared to transportation funding which runs well over \$20 billion a year. Unless long-term measures are taken, we may be providing highways, transit and airports only to deliver us to destinations where we cannot swim, fish or drink the water.

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