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METRO WASTEWATER RECLAMATION DISTRICT PLANS IMPROVEMENTS TO ACCOMMODATE GROWTH, IMPROVE WATER QUALITY, REFURBISH SYSTEM

DENVER — The agency that provides sewage treatment for more than 50 cities and sanitation districts in the Denver metro area plans a major 10-year facility improvement program to handle the area's population growth, improve the quality of the water it discharges into the South Platte River, and upgrade or replace some older facilities.

"Population growth is driving some of this," said Robert Hite, District Manager of the Metro Wastewater Reclamation District. "But we'll also be making the water we put into the South Platte even cleaner than it is now and refurbishing some of our older treatment facilities and sewers."

The water quality improvements are a response to stricter water standards approved by federal and state agencies. For example, to meet new disinfection standards adopted by the Colorado Water Quality Control Commission in 2000, Metro will need new equipment costing about \$15 million. The result will be higher quality water discharged to the South Platte.

"It's been 16 years since we significantly expanded our treatment facility and a dozen years since we made major upgrades to our treatment levels," Hite said of the planned improvements and refurbishments. "These improvements will put plans in motion to take us to 2020 and beyond."

The Metro District is the largest sewage treatment facility in the west and serves most of metropolitan Denver. Its Board of Directors is scheduled to act on the Central Treatment Plant portion of the facility improvement program next month.

Hite said the program includes just over \$600 million in different construction projects over the next 10 years, although he said the cost could be less depending on things such as actual population growth, new regulations, and the condition of equipment when it's refurbished.

The money to pay for the improvements will come through user fees the Metro District calls "annual charges for service" and a capital replacement fund initiated several years ago. Annual charges for service is the fee Metro charges the cities and sanitation districts it serves to recover the cost of providing sewage treatment for them. No bonds or other debt will be incurred.

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Rate increases will be relatively small. The portion of an average household's monthly sewer bill that goes to the Metro District will be about \$6.84 in 2003 and increase by about 30 cents a year so that, by 2013, it will have increased \$3 to \$9.84. Since the Metro District is a wholesale utility, a portion of each homeowner's bill also goes to the city or sanitation district the homeowner lives in.

The average residential sewer bill in the U.S. was \$232.59 a year (\$19.38 a month) in 2002, compared to Denver's average residential sewer bill of about \$175.50 a year (\$14.63 a month).

Hite said some expenditures have already begun, and the main expenditures will be phased in over 10 years beginning in 2004.

One large project would be a major upgrade to the secondary treatment portion of Metro's South Plant, which was first placed in service in 1976.

"This aging facility will be rehabilitated and upgraded to provide nutrient removal — primarily nitrogen," said Steve Rogowski, Metro's director of Operations and Maintenance. "The upgraded system will be cheaper and easier to operate and will reduce the total amount of nutrients in the South Platte."

 cost to improve this portion of the treatment system alone is estimated at more than \$160 million. This part of the program won't begin, however, until about 2008. The District will continue to evaluate system requirements before starting on it.

Other projects will include refurbishing or adding to the underground pipes that comprise the Metro District's sewer system and new equipment for processing solids and biosolids.

"People take the work we do for granted, and we want to keep it that way by making sure we have the facilities in place to do our job," Hite said. "It's like getting a new set of tires for your car. Your friends won't notice, but it makes a big difference in the safety of your car."

The Metro Wastewater Reclamation District is a regional government (special district) formed under Colorado law in 1961. As the Denver metropolitan area's regional wastewater treatment authority, it provides wholesale wastewater transmission and treatment service to 58 local governments. These local governments include cities (Arvada, Aurora, Denver, Lakewood, Thornton, and about half of Westminster) and more than 45 smaller municipalities and sanitation districts. They, in turn, provide retail wastewater services to approximately 1.5 million people in metro Denver.

The Metro District has 236 miles of trunk sewers called "interceptor sewers" that collect wastewater from neighborhood sewers and deliver it to the Central Treatment Plant. The Metro District treated about 136.6 million gallons of wastewater a day in 2002, or almost 50 billion gallons for the year. The treated wastewater is discharged to the South Platte River. The treatment process mimics nature's way of cleaning water — only it's faster. The treated water is suitable for agriculture, fish and aquatic life, industrial use, water supply, and recreation. It makes up 90% of the South Platte for more than nine months of the year.

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