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Sacramento running out of time for costly fixes on aging sewers

rlillis@sacbee.com

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Beneath its surface, Sacramento is a decrepit city.

Hundreds of miles of concrete and clay pipe that carry sewage and stormwater to treatment plants and eventually to the Sacramento River are old, some dating back to the early 1900s.

Replacing all that pipe will cost an estimated \$2.4 billion. That's six new downtown sports arenas, or two new Terminal B's at Sacramento International Airport.

It's a sum that will require raising residents' utility bills by a still-unknown amount – but city officials say they can't keep putting off the job.

"I think we're all living on borrowed time," said Councilman Rob Fong, whose district covering the central city and Land Park has miles of 100-year-old pipe beneath it.

"The difficult thing about a water and sewer system is that nobody thinks about it until it fails," Fong said. "And once you have a failure, it can be cataclysmic."

As it stands, the city spends about \$3.7 million a year replacing and upgrading the pipes. At that rate, the whole system will be replaced every 650 years.

City officials want to get on a schedule of replacing the system every 100 years to comply with federal recommendations. To do so, they will eventually need to dedicate \$26 million annually toward that effort.

Dave Brent, interim director of the city's Department of Utilities, is scheduled to appear Tuesday before the City Council to begin discussion of how the city should pay for accelerated replacement of the system. A precise financing model has not been developed; it will involve an increase in the rates property owners pay for water and sewer service, Brent said. The City Council has final say over those rates.

An increase in storm-drainage rates may also be discussed in the future, but those increases must be approved by a vote of the people.

"The undeniable fact is that we are faced with an aging infrastructure," Brent said.

An increase in city utility rates could be a double whammy for residents who may see their bills for sewage treatment rise in the next few years, as the regional sanitation district complies with an order from state regulators to more thoroughly treat sewage before releasing it into the Sacramento River. The city of Sacramento sends its sewage to the regional treatment plant near Elk Grove.

The sanitation district says it will cost more than \$2 billion to comply with the mandate. It has appealed to the State Water Resources Control Board.

Brent said the city, too, could find itself the target of state water regulators if it doesn't act. The regional water board could order the city to halt new development until upgrades are made. In addition, an old system leads to "a bigger potential for catastrophic failures," Brent said.

Failures do happen now, although they mostly go unnoticed outside of the front lawns and street corners where they occur.

Since the beginning of the year, raw sewage has leaked out of pipes in the city system about 100 times. Those incidents often occur when sewer lines are blocked or broken, or the system is overwhelmed by storm runoff.

Most incidents involve only a few gallons of sewage. But stories of larger failures are legendary.

In 2004, hundreds of fish in Southside Park's lake were killed when a severe thunderstorm overwhelmed the combined sewer and storm drainage system, sending sewage into the lake.

Years earlier, storms often led to manholes popping open, flooding central city streets with sewage and runoff.

Sewer backups were more common until the 1990s, when the Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control Board ordered the city to upgrade. A \$132 million improvement project led to new underground storage facilities, larger pipes and an upgraded pumping station on Riverside Boulevard.

Now, attention is on the pipes.

One of the areas with the greatest need is the city core, where older neighborhoods such as downtown, midtown, Land Park and Curtis Park are served by a combined pipe system carrying sewage and stormwater. Sacramento is one of just two cities in the state with a combined system. The other is San Francisco.

Of nearly 250 miles of pipe in that system, 27 percent is at least a century old. More than two-thirds of the system was installed before World War II.

While much of the system is in adequate condition, officials said, the public health risk associated with a failure is high, considering that catastrophes can lead to sewage pouring into the streets.

On the city's north side, which includes North Sacramento and Del Paso Heights, sewage has spilled 28 times this year, according to state data.

"We're almost at emergency mode," said Councilwoman Sandy Sheedy, who represents North Sacramento neighborhoods. "And all we're doing right now is putting a Band-Aid on something that is going to be a larger problem if we don't start fixing the infrastructure now."

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Call The Bee's Ryan Lillis, (916) 321-1085.

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