

CITIZENS LEAGUE REPORT

No. 122

**Metropolitan Area Water Supply And  
Sewage Disposal**

**January 1961**

Citizens League  
545 Mobil Oil Building  
Minneapolis 2, Minnesota

Adopted by  
Board of Directors  
Jan. 4, 1961

122

December 29, 1960

TO: Board of Directors

FROM: Metropolitan Area Study Committee, Ed Allen, Chairman

SUBJECT: Proposed report on water supply and sewage disposal in the Twin Cities Metropolitan Area.

#### PURPOSE OF REPORT

The League's 1960-61 research and action program includes the objective: "Better utilize area water resources and sanitation facilities." The program says that "the League should anticipate the introduction of legislation at the next session of the State Legislature urging establishment of some form of metropolitan sanitary district, and should be prepared to express specific views on the need for structural changes in government to cope with the situation."

Responsibility for conducting the research phase of the work for this general objective is assigned to the Metropolitan Area Study Committee. This is the Metropolitan Area Study Committee's first report on the subject.

#### BACKGROUND OF AREA'S SEWAGE AND WATER PROBLEM

New residential areas in this metropolitan region, like those in regions of other parts of the country, have outstripped community facilities of water, sewerage, and waste disposal. This has been more obvious in these three fields than with any other municipal services that urban dwellers have usually come to expect. The vast expansion of housing beyond existing systems was feasible due to the devising of reliable and convenient "home water systems" and of the sewage disposal method of septic tanks, cesspool and drain field. This, together with the response of private initiative to the demands for mass housing, has created the immense expansion so aptly called urban sprawl. The tendency has been to develop "raw land" which the developers could buy cheaply without sewer or water service. The decision of the developers to use individual systems has been encouraged by the lack of community systems in the rural townships and villages where they usually build.

In time the pleasure of open space living has often given way to the stark fact that so many neighbors have moved in closely on all sides, that individual sewage disposal is now less satisfactory or workable and pollution of the soil is increased by the "pressure" of large numbers. Furthermore, the large lot sizes required by suburban governments in the first adoptions of zoning and building codes in order to allow for individual sewage disposal has now created a situation militating against an economical changeover to community systems.

The first attempt at a solution of the pollution problem by the close-in suburbs has been to contract with Minneapolis or St. Paul to take their sewage. These two cities have been operating a sewage disposal plant jointly since 1938, having been forced to build by reason of their own increased pollution of the Mississippi which condition downstream communities and bordering states could no longer tolerate. The

second ring of suburbs are finding it harder to solve their sewage problem. Intermixed with the basic situation for every suburb and subdivision has been the fact that some areas are unsuitable for individual home sewage systems because of the heavy clay and impervious soils, such as are encountered in parts of Ramsey and much of Dakota County.

In like manner, but much less extensively, water has been contracted for from the two big cities by their nearest neighboring cities and villages.

The second step toward a solution has been the intervention of the State Department of Health and the F.H.A. authorities as complaints began to increase. Their part in the overall discussion has been criticized as too severe in their standards but it remains that hidden health menaces rarely stir enough public reaction to start even moderate remedial measures until a dramatization takes place. A semi-official study in the eastern shore communities on White Bear Lake has brought out a strong suspicion that pollution has caused the unusual frequency of gastro-intestinal complaints which had not hitherto been attributed to a specific cause.

The third phase has been the culmination of study and political discussion with specific proposals. There are the three reports on water and sewage made in 1960 by committees of the Metropolitan Planning Commission to the Commission which recommend, in substance, metropolitan approaches to solutions for both subjects. There is also the report of its future needs by the present Twin Cities Sanitary District, the latest of a series resulting from a five-year study by the district. In substance, it recommends a unified approach to sewage disposal in the area.

The executive secretary of the Legislative Commission on Municipal Laws has recommended a unified approach, but has injected the look ahead to other acute problems of metropolitan-wide scope. He sees the need to create a basic organization capable of expansion without a continuance of the multiplication of special purpose agencies. He also injects the idea of a new political arrangement to give suburban areas more direct influence on the policy-making of the metropolitan sewage district.

There is also an active group pressing for a quick solution for a critical area roughly described as the north suburban communities -- Brooklyn Park on the Shingle Creek watershed west of the Mississippi, and Blaine, Coon Rapids, Fridley, Moundsview and Spring Lake Park on the Rice Creek watershed east of the river. These six communities are seeking to get legislation permitting them to build jointly a sewage treatment works emptying its effluent into the Mississippi below the Camden Bridge. Alternatively, they would welcome any solution which would permit them to build local sewers in the very near future.

#### IMPORTANT FACTS AND PRINCIPLES

The most important facts and principles to be considered seem to be:

1. We can anticipate a tremendous growth of population and a dynamic change in our metropolitan area. Normal engineering planning has projected a population almost double by the end of 40 years, or an addition of 1,250,000 persons. This compares with a growth of 600,000 in the past 30 years and a built-in rate of increase which the engineers have actually predicted will fall off and yet produce these astounding figures.

2. Negotiations of contracts for municipal services are not always simple. After the first suburbs and the core cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul had hammered out the first contracts, later contract negotiations for a while were made at "arm's length" with little trouble in reaching agreements. This now appears to be less true as later suburbs have been more pressed by their sewage problem and alternate solutions have become fewer while the core cities are less able to accept more sewage.

Furthermore, the present Sanitary District itself cannot plan for adequate capacity if possible new responsibilities are indefinite. There has been a strong feeling by the suburbs that they too could not plan just when they might have to provide additional money to build facilities whose necessity is caused by acts of others indistinctly mixed with their own.

3. There is a deep-seated concern about making government too far away from the people, by creating super-governments and "third layers" of local government. This cannot be entirely gainsaid. In practice the present districts (airports, sewage disposal, mosquito control) are now insulated from directly-elected popular control. One important local official has said, however, that he has seen no local function lost to bigger government where it can be and has been done well by local government.

4. Only the interceptors, sewage treatment, and waste disposal functions are proposed for metropolitan control. Local sewerage is to remain locally collected and supervised. Local sewers and street maintenance are so interrelated as to coordination of work and personnel as to reinforce local control.

5. From the beginning of our study it has been noted that there is a tendency to add one more function every two to four years that has a truly metropolitan scope -- parks, planning, mosquito control, and sports arenas in the recent past have been added to sewage disposal and airports. The question is whether or not this splintered extra government is bad organization, costly to the public and not fully responsible to it. This question will be discussed in more detail in this committee's inventory of government in our metropolitan area.

6. Because the Legislature does not like to enact measures without a large degree of agreement among those affected there is need for an early agreement on broad principles so that legislation will be passed at this session.

### CONCLUSIONS

We conclude that:

1. The recommendation for an expanded sanitary district is the soundest, most economical long-range solution for the problem to be faced in the next quarter century or more.
2. The most important requirement for the new district is a good system of popular control. It should provide equitable representation for the whole service area.
3. The organization of the new district should follow the best practice for policy formation and responsible, effective administration.

4. Agreement on the expanded district will be hastened if a plan for equitably financing the expansion of facilities is decided upon at a very early date.
5. A reasonable timetable for construction of expanded sewage facilities needs to be presented soon.
6. A report of the area's water resources should be assembled from existing studies. We believe that water must be the subject of separate consideration so as not to jeopardize the achievement of the expanded sanitary district. The water situation should be considered by recognized experts in the field of underground water as well as surface water and known areas of controversy placated before final draft of the recommendations.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

In consideration of the foregoing facts, principles, and conclusions, the Metropolitan Area Study Committee recommends that the Board of Directors of the Citizens League endorse the expansion of the Minneapolis - St. Paul Sanitary District, either by amendatory legislation or by new legislation, so as to provide adequate sewage disposal facilities for the Twin Cities Metropolitan Area, provided that agreement can be reached upon:

1. A plan for equitable representation of the people in the area on the controlling body of the expanded district.
2. An equitable plan for financing the expanded district.
3. Boundaries, powers, and duties of the expanded district.
4. A reasonable time table for construction of expanded sewage disposal facilities.

This committee proposes to conduct further research to develop detailed recommendations in the four above-named areas, and report these to the Board of Directors.