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No tax hike needed to clean up Chicago River, water agency says

Cost of project to aid recreation put at \$139 million, far less than initial \$1 billion estimated

By [Michael Hawthorne](#), Chicago Tribune reporter

March 2, 2012

Making stretches of the Chicago River and other local waterways safer for recreation won't require a tax increase and will cost dramatically less than officials ominously predicted less than a year ago, according to documents filed Thursday by the agency that handles Cook County's sewage and stormwater.

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The Metropolitan Water Reclamation District said installing equipment to kill the germs in partially treated sewage will cost \$139 million, about 7 times less than the \$1 billion that top district officials once said it would require and half as much as they later argued it would take to disinfect the wastewater.

Contractors are set to complete the project by 2015, district officials said, much faster than the decade-long schedule outlined in records submitted last year to state regulators. They also said the equipment should cost about \$5 million a year to operate, less than half of previous estimates.

David St. Pierre, the district's new executive director, told elected commissioners that spreading the construction costs over three years will enable them to overhaul two massive treatment plants within their routine budget for bricks-and-mortar projects. The work won't cut into money set aside to complete the Deep Tunnel, the district's long-delayed pollution- and flood-control project, St. Pierre said.

Chicago is the only major U.S. city that skips the disinfection step when treating human and industrial waste, largely because officials assumed nobody would want to come near rivers that carry wastewater away from Lake Michigan. But after nearly a decade of debate, the Obama administration last year ordered state and local officials to comply with federal Clean Water Act standards that

already apply to most other cities.

The relatively quick response from district officials is a sharp contrast to the last eight years, during which they spent more than \$13 million on lawyers and studies challenging a cleanup initiative backed by Mayor Rahm Emanuel, former Mayor Richard Daley, U.S. Sens. Dick Durbin and Mark Kirk and other elected officials.

Among other objections, top district officials argued the project would require a 15 percent tax increase, sap money from other sewer projects, cause global warming by requiring more electricity and lead to children drowning because cleaner waterways would draw more people.

"We are taking a different approach," said St. Pierre, hired in June after serving as Atlanta's deputy water commissioner. "We're taking a path that the district hasn't followed in the past."

Depending on the time of year, 60 percent to 100 percent of the water in the Chicago River, Little Calumet River and Cal-Sag Channel comes from sewage treatment plants operated by the Water Reclamation District, an independent agency with a \$1 billion annual budget funded mostly by federal grants and taxes collected from Chicago and the Cook County suburbs.

Levels of bacteria and other pathogens in the water are so high that signs caution it is unsafe for "any human body contact." The signs are posted next to hundreds of pipes that dump raw sewage and runoff into the waterways after rainstorms, another problem the Deep Tunnel is supposed to mostly eliminate when it is completed by 2029.

Steady improvements during the past three decades have turned the waterways into what Emanuel often calls "recreational frontiers." Parks and restaurants are being built along the banks, and people increasingly use the rivers and channels for canoeing, kayaking and boating. But the waterways still are among the dirtiest in the nation.

To improve water quality, the district plans to zap wastewater at its Calumet plant with chlorine — technology widely used elsewhere, including at two of the district's smaller treatment plants. The Calumet plant already has a large tank to hold the wastewater long enough for chlorine to kill germs; the toxic chemical will be stripped out before wastewater is pumped into the Little Calumet River.

The North Side plant will rely on ultraviolet radiation, which is more expensive technology but saves the district the cost of installing a holding tank, St. Pierre said.

District officials shaved hundreds of millions from earlier cost estimates when the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency opted not to order disinfection equipment at the region's biggest treatment plant, in Stickney along the heavily industrialized Sanitary and Ship Canal. Surveys show steady recreation on the stretches covered by the EPA order, but not near the Stickney plant.

After St. Pierre directed district engineers to take another look at what it would take to comply with the federal order, the latest plan estimated costs to be about half of a 2011 estimate to clean up the Calumet and North Side plants. The budget is even less than what the EPA suggested it would cost.

"That's very good news for Chicago-area residents and for the growing number of people recreating in the Chicago and Calumet rivers," said Susan Hedman, the EPA's regional administrator.

Terrence O'Brien, president of the district's elected board, led the opposition to cleaning up the waterways. He was the lone dissenter in an 8-1 vote last year to back the project, which he has said is a waste of money "when people are losing their jobs and homes."

Asked to explain the vast difference between the earlier cost projections and the spending plan outlined Thursday, O'Brien said he based his earlier comments on staff estimates. "I didn't predict them; staff predicted them," said O'Brien, who chose not to run for re-election this year.

The owner of a home valued at \$267,000, the Cook County average, pays \$222 a year in property taxes to the Water Reclamation District. Federal surveys show the district's tax rate is lower than what is paid in most other big cities for sewage treatment.

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