

Utility authority board OKs \$6.68M budget

■ Wastewater rate for cities rises 34 cents

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After five months of preparation and with consensus among its five municipal customers, the

DeSoto County Regional Utility Authority board on Wednesday approved unanimously a \$6,683,681 budget for the fiscal year that begins Oct. 1.

Under the blueprint, Olive Branch, Southaven, Horn Lake, Hernando and Walls will be charged \$3.19 per 1,000 gallons of treated wastewater, a 34-cent increase from the fiscal 2013 rate of 2.85. The utility authority has no control

over how much each city, in turn, charges residents or businesses.

The revised rate "reflects our new Johnson Creek plant, debt service and operating expenses," said utility board chairman B.J. Page. It also shows the impact of budget cuts and revisions that kept the rate increase from being higher, he added.

Page said a flat-rate approach to legal billing by

the Butler Snow firm is being considered and the \$250,000 budgeted last year for legal costs has been trimmed to \$225,000 and may be reduced further. In other areas, sludge disposal slides from \$380,000 to \$330,000; beaver eradication stays flat at \$5,000 and so does

program and technical support at \$275,000. Total debt service rises from \$3 million in the amended

fiscal 2013 budget to just under \$3.35 million.

Joe Frank Lauderdale, utility board member who's also city engineer for Hernando, said at a recent municipal meeting "everyone expressed their opinion" on the proposed budget. There was general agreement among mayors, the board was told.

Fiscal 2014 budget fig-

See UTILITY, BDSA

ures, presented by Tom Flanagan, consulting engineer with the Waggoner firm, estimates annual flow at about 1.27 billion gallons for Olive Branch, served by the Ross Road, Braybourne and Shortfork wastewater treatment plants; 438.7 million for Hernando, served by the Short Fork plant; 154.2 million for Horn Lake, served by the Johnson Creek plant; 86.8 million for Southaven, served by the Ross Road and Short Fork plants; and 45.2 million for Walls, served by Johnson Creek. The utility authority only serves outlying areas of Southaven and Horn Lake, according to engineering consultant Tracy Huffman, also of Waggoner.

The Metro plant in the Olive Branch industrial park also serves that city, which has been seeking to turn sewer operations,

including the Hampton Inn pump station, over to the county. But operation costs won't be a factor in the fiscal 2014 budget.

"We've run at least two scenarios on running the plant, and we're at a stage where we're not so fearful about taking it over," said utility board member Barry Bridgforth. "The process we're in would have us take it over in the next 12 to 14 months."

Of the budget package, board member Wade Carter said: "We're not going to take over Metro, but basically we got everything we asked for."

"All in all, it looks like a good budget," Page said. Even with the rate hike, the county's expanding, upgrading service remains competitive in cost to cities, said consultants.

In other matters, the board approved the final pay application by Louisiana-based contractor Max Foote for completion of the Johnson Creek plant, which was welcomed into DeSoto County's \$100 million-plus wastewater system with a Sept. 5 ribbon-cutting that drew local, state and federal officials and lawmakers. The total construction bill came in at \$13.7 million, \$200,000 under the original estimate, said Steve Canizaro, project manager with the Pickering engineering firm.

The Johnson Creek plant, built for an initial treatment capacity of 2 million gallons a day,



replaces four aging western facilities in DeSoto County.

It's hailed as a magnet for economic development as well as a boon for the environment with improved cleanup and plans for water re-use in

agricultural and other applications.

Meanwhile, at the Short Fork plant in populous eastern DeSoto County, a \$10 million expansion is planned to double its flow capacity from 4 million gallons a day to 8 million.