

Taylor wants task force on combined sewer overflows

Staff Wire Reports

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CUMBERLAND — Maryland lawmakers are looking at ways to help smaller municipalities cope with the costs of replacing aging sewer lines.

House Speaker Casper Taylor Jr. said that he will call for the creation of a legislative task force to investigate paying the estimated \$1 billion cost of upgrading wastewater treatment plants across the state.

"Obviously this can't be solved without substantial federal help," said Taylor. He said the proposed task force would help bring about a federal/state partnership "to create a remedy, not just for Western Maryland, but for everybody. This is also a nationwide problem."

The federal government contributes about 30 percent of the cost, states pay 20 percent and the remainder is shouldered by municipalities.

Local governments, however, often have a tough time coming up with their share of the money.

In Cumberland, the lagging city economy is making it difficult for local officials to come up with the \$30 million cost of replacing 200-year-old storm drains.

"This is the kind of problem that isn't going to get solved overnight," Taylor said. "We've got to put together long-range strategies that would make it work."

He has been gathering lawmakers and municipal officials to focus attention on the issue. The group has asked Gov. Parris Glendening to use his position as incoming president of the Council of State Governments to convene a summit on the problem.

"There's no way that cities in the shape of places like Cumberland could begin to

afford these kinds of costs without a massive federal program to help fund them,"

Taylor said. "I don't know whether we can accomplish specific funding this session. I think the first thing you have to do is get everybody at the table and start to fashion a strategy that everyone can live with."

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has proposed new regulations that would require municipalities to make up to \$100 billion in improvements to eliminate all but the most unavoidable sewer overflows.

The rules must be approved by the new Bush administration.

The rules would also clarify how municipalities should prevent sewer overflows and require that health agencies and the public be informed of potential health threats when an overflow occurs.

Two sewage pumping stations south of Baltimore last year spilled several million gallons of raw sewage into area waterways.

Baltimore officials did not notify the city health department, which issues public warnings about stream contamination.