



## Communities United For Action

1814 Dreman Avenue, Cincinnati, OH 45223  
(513) 853-3947 | [www.cufacincy.org](http://www.cufacincy.org)

December 10, 2020

Board of Hamilton County Commissioners  
138 E. Court St., Room 603  
Cincinnati, OH 45202

### Re: MSD 2021 Budget Proposal

Dear President Driehaus, Vice President Summerow Dumas, and Commissioner Parks:

In reviewing the proposed 2021 Metropolitan Sewer District of Greater Cincinnati (MSD) Operating and Capital Budgets, we urge you to focus on the needs of MSD ratepayers and sewer backup victims. The City and County must comply with the Consent Decree, which requires that neighborhoods hardest hit by sewer backups and overflows be prioritized for projects.

### Affordability & Sewer Bill Forgiveness for COVID hardship

We are pleased to see that there will be no sewer rate increase for the 6<sup>th</sup> consecutive year, as the Board considers rate restructuring to account for the burden of impervious surfaces on our sewers and negotiates a Phase 2 plan for the Wet Weather Improvement Program with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

While the Customer Assistance Program (CAP) for low-income senior homeowners has been implemented, it does not cover all senior citizens eligible for the current program. MSD must improve its outreach to enroll people in the existing CAP. We recommend a detailed plan outlining the cost of outreach and advertisement for the program. The plan should include advertisement in every water and sewer bill. **CUFA also recommends MSD anticipate an additional \$1 million decrease in revenue to immediately expand the program to senior renters who pay the water and sewer bill.** This expansion does not require a change in any Ohio Revised Code.

**Additionally, we urge the Board to implement a temporary program for relief from back sewer bills for ratepayers experiencing COVID-related hardships.** We understand that Ohio Revised Code restricts the types of assistance that county sewer districts can provide to ratepayers. We do not however, see a penalty enumerated in the law for implementing such programs on either a temporary or permanent basis.

## **Uniform, required, public engagement on all MSD projects**

We have previously met with each of you to discuss a policy that would require uniform public engagement on infrastructure and development projects that use public resources. We will continue to encourage the Board to implement a clear policy for required public engagement. In the meantime, as you are considering MSD's 2021 budget, CUFA would like to understand why MSD varies so greatly in its approach to public engagement on each major project. **CUFA recommends the Board requires that future projects considered for funding must have clearly delineated steps for public engagement before being granted approval.**

## **Updates on 2020 MSD budget spending**

In 2019, the Board approved funding for two projects of interest to CUFA: the Ludlow Run Sustainable Source Control Project and the buyouts of homes along Muddy Creek, which have for years experienced catastrophic sewer backups.

The Ludlow Run project is moving forward, albeit very slowly. CUFA received an update from MSD that planning for the project would not be completed until the end of 2022. This project was funded for planning under the "Urgent Capacity" fund for 2020. A three-year planning timeline seems anything but urgent.

We understand that the MSD informed residents of Muddy Creek Road that they would begin appraisals to buy their properties in April 2020. This year, the timeline for those buyouts has continued to be pushed back, with no forthcoming information from MSD to residents about when they will move forward. Residents of Muddy Creek Road are, in the meantime, living in fear that the next big rain will bring yet more sewer backups. Some residents are facing medical issues that could be greatly exacerbated should another backup occur. They cannot afford further delay to get out of these unsafe homes. **We view the delay of the home buyouts on Muddy Creek Road as a violation of the Consent Decree requirements for the "Water-in-Basement" program. We demand the Board ensures there is immediate action to buy out the homes.**

## **New projects for 2021**

While CUFA supports funding for the proposed project to alleviate sewer backups in Hyde Park, Oakley and Norwood, we are concerned that there are no new projects in other neighborhoods that continue to experience sewer backups.

Residents in Green Township and Covedale have experienced backup issues for decades with no end in sight. Bond Hill residents were hard-hit by the storm in August of 2016, but continue to experience backups during regular rains. In both the Westside and Bond Hill, sporadic

installation of prevention devices has neighbors worried that it is a costly, band-aid solution that just pushes the problem off on their neighbors instead of solving the problem of sewer capacity.

**CUFA encourages the Board to scrutinize the new heat map data from MSD about where complaints occur and are addressed, and the criteria they use for choosing new source control projects to alleviate sewer backups. Furthermore, CUFA recommends that projects are funded to increase sewer capacity to decrease the amount of money spent on prevention devices. We strongly oppose any pilot program that would require homeowners to assume financial responsibility for prevention of backups caused by lack of sewer capacity.**

### **Web upgrades funding**

**CUFA encourages the Board to fund MSD's proposal to update their website to increase transparency for Project Groundwork spending and progress.** In 2019, CUFA requested that MSD make a Project Groundwork dashboard that is user-friendly to connect residents to the information they need about projects in their neighborhood. MSD told CUFA that they could not make some of our suggested improvements due to constraints of their website and lack of funding for sophisticated technology that would make such a dashboard easily searchable and interactive for residents.

In summary, we are pleased that the Board is committed to having a Phase 2 plan for new projects to address sewer capacity before allowing new rate increases. We hope that the Board will work in 2021 to restructure sewer rates to ensure equitability for all of MSD's ratepayers. We encourage you to focus on ensuring that this and future MSD budgets center on those who are most impacted by backups and overflows.

Sincerely,

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