by Eric A. Goldstein
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The Bloomberg Administration is expecting to make major changes in how billions of dollars are spent on the environment. Chris Ward, the commissioner of the New York City Department of Environmental Protection, seems to be doing some big thinking about the city's future, judging from his presentation at a City Council hearing of the department's new $16.5 billion, ten year capital plan — the blueprint for how much the city will spend from 2004 to 2013 on such needs as water tunnels, sewage treatment plant upgrades, and reservoir protection.

The plan, which would double current expenditures, is not yet in final form, nor have all of its details been released. That will happen in May, with the release of the executive budget.

Some elements are certain to stir opposition, and several proposed alterations would require state or federal approval.

TOP PRIORITY — DRINKING WATER

"Our paramount responsibility over the next decade and beyond is to ensure the uninterrupted conveyance of clean, safe, and sufficient drinking water to nine million people," Commissioner Ward recently told the City Council's Environmental Protection Committee.

The plan shifts focus away from where it has been over the last few decades — sewage treatment plant construction — and places highest priority on the infrastructure needed to bring New Yorkers their drinking water.

One reason for the new focus is that the city's world-class water supply network is aging. The city's 85-mile long Delaware Aqueduct, which has brought water downstate from four reservoirs west of the Hudson River for more than half a century, has sprung several serious leaks. As the city moves to repair these leaks, it is also seeking to make sure that it could supply sufficient drinking water even if this aqueduct, which ordinarily supplies up to 50 percent of the city's water, must be temporarily closed.

Other parts of the water supply system are also aging. The two in-city water tunnels that transport upstate water to connector mains and then to smaller mains under local streets, were constructed in 1917 and 1936, and have never been shut down for inspection.

Funds would be expended to continue work on the third water tunnel within city limits, continuing an initiative started 30 years ago that is already the single largest capital project in the city's history. Millions of dollars a year would also be provided for ongoing maintenance of reservoirs, dams, pump stations, water mains and other water system components.

The biggest new project unveiled by Commissioner Ward is a proposed $2.5 billion aqueduct that could carry drinking water from the Westchester County Kensico Reservoir, which collects water from all other Catskill and Delaware system reservoirs, into New York City. The 16 mile underground tunnel would provide needed redundancy, according to the department, at a critical juncture in the entire downstate water supply.

One controversial expenditure is the roughly $1.5 billion cost of constructing a filtration plant to treat drinking water coming from the city's oldest reservoir system — the Croton, whose watershed is located primarily in Westchester and Putnam counties. The Department of Environmental Protection maintains that this facility is needed to assure safe tap water quality and to meet federal law. Activists counter that reducing pollution discharges into the Croton watershed is a less expensive way of safeguarding water quality and that the city has not yet presented a convincing public case for why Croton filtration is necessary to protect health. There is also continuing debate about where to site this facility, with the city's desire to locate the plant in Van Cortlandt Park colliding with the plans of a determined parks constituency.

Other priority drinking water expenditures in the plan include an ultra-violet disinfection plant for water coming from the West-of-Hudson Catskill and Delaware reservoirs and continued implementation of the programs begun in the 1990s to reduce pollution into reservoirs and safeguard upstate watershed lands, in an effort to avoid the estimated six billion dollar cost of constructing filtration facilities for the Catskill and Delaware reservoir supplies.

SHIFTING FROM SEWAGE TREATMENT

Over the past decade, the single largest category of capital spending by the Department of

Environmental Projection was for the upgrading and modernizing of the city's 14 sewage treatment plants — about 41 percent of total capital spending by the department from 1993 to 2002. These expenditures were necessary for the city to bring its sewage treatment plant discharges up to federal Clean Water Act standards, and reduce the amount of sewage being discharged into New York's surrounding waters.

But much of that work is now complete, or nearing completion, and the department is now looking to lessen the costs for such projects as nitrogen reduction and controlling combined sewer overflow.

A consent decree requires that the city remove nitrogen from wastewaters being discharged from city sewage plants into the Long Island Sound and the Upper East River. (Nitrogen discharges deplete water of oxygen needed to sustain marine life, and this program has been viewed as an essential part of efforts to restore the Long Island Sound ecosystem.)

Rather than ignoring this mandate, Commissioner Ward is asking the state and federal governments (and water quality advocates) to work with him to find less expensive ways of meeting the consent decree's ten year goals.

The commissioner is also seeking new approaches to control the combined sewer overflow problem — when storm water runoff that has combined with sewage drains into surrounding waterways.

Activists express some concern. "We hope this doesn't mean that necessary upgrades to pollution controls and air monitoring at the problematic North River Sewage Treatment Plant will be sacrificed, because we have seen that happen many times in the past," said Swati Prakash, environmental health director of West Harlem Environmental Action (WE ACT).

But Ward said all the department is asking for is some flexibility: "Existing consent decrees dictate specific construction projects and schedules, and they leave little room for innovation, technological progress or prioritization of projects."

Ward argues that if the plan were to include all of the projects the department deems essential to keeping its water supply in a state of good repair and at the same time meeting all of its consent decree obligations as currently written, total costs could balloon to as much as $24 billion. Under a $16.5 billion capital plan, water and sewer rates would increase annually at somewhere between six and nine percent a year, a rate the department maintains is equitable when compared to water prices in other big cities.

Though City Councilmember Jim Gennero, who chairs the Environmental Protection Committee, deems the city's plan too "foggy" on the details to evaluate it yet, he shares the priority of "insuring that the watershed lands around our reservoirs are protected in perpetuity so that we have a safe and unfiltered drinking water supply for generations to come." At the same time, he is concerned about keeping water rates down for New Yorkers who have "already been socked with property tax and transit fare increases."

From a strategic standpoint, DEP Commissioner Ward seems to have positioned himself well to begin the debate over the future direction for the environment. He has a vision with protection of the water supply system at its heart. He recognizes the need for sustaining vital city infrastructure, and he is seeking to carve out a middle ground between an unrealistically high capital program that would trigger overwhelming water rate hikes, and a status quo capital plan that limits expenditures but does not set out to meet the city's most essential long-term capital needs.

LINKS IN THE NEWS

Earth Day is April 22nd — a great opportunity to speak with city and state elected officials on various environmental issues of interest. Here are two links that offer information on how to participate and have your voice heard:

New York League of Conservation Voters
The website of the New York League of Conservation Voters,click on Earth Day. The League is sponsoring a "Lobby Day at New York City Hall" on April 22nd is setting up meetings in advance and provides training for those who are making their maiden visits.

Environmental Advocates

The website of the statewide environmental group Environmental Advocates. This group also coordinates an annual lobby day in Albany. This year, the event takes place on April 28th (so you can make it to both City Hall and the State Capitol, if you so choose). Click on Earth Day for all the details.

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