

## Bay cleanup cost shows no sign of going down

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There has been no change in the projected costs or deadlines for meeting state and federal mandates designed to clean up the Susquehanna River and improve water quality in the Chesapeake Bay.

The Williamsport Sanitary Authority and local municipalities still must scrape together about \$150 million or more to comply with a bay cleanup strategy by reducing nutrient levels and controlling sewage discharges into the river during extreme wet-weather situations.

Walter Nicholson, the interim executive director of the Williamsport Municipal Water and Sanitary authorities, briefed the city's Rotary Club at the Scottish Rite's Howard Memorial Theater Monday on the status of a situation that could "triple" local sanitary rates without help from the state or federal level.

"It's a statewide problem," he added. "We're not pointing fingers at DEP or agriculture."

But Nicholson said nutrient levels attributable to sanitary treatment plants are significantly less than those from agriculture, but the current strategy targets sewage treatment plants.

The upgrading of treatment plants will get "measurable but relatively small improvements in nutrient reduction at a very high unit cost," according to Nicholson, and he urged local residents to contact the area's state and federal legislators about the issue.

If the current strategy is not amended, it will create a huge financial burden on municipalities across the state unless legislators find ways "to fund these improvements," he said.

The mandates evolved from lawsuits filed by environmentalists in the 1990s and an agreement signed in 2000 by this state's governor and those of other states with waterways emptying into the bay.

At this point, the local authority and its municipal partners are working on plans to upgrade their collection systems to reduce the mixing of storm water and sewage and add improvements to the treatment plants to meet the levels set for reducing nutrients — primarily the levels of nitrogen and phosphorus.

The cost of final compliance came as a shock, Nichols revealed.

"(It) came as sort of a bolt of the blue," he said

He said the state Department of Environmental Protection underestimated early estimates of the cost of its strategy. and projections have ballooned from early predictions of \$190 million statewide to more recent ones in the \$1 billion range.

Nicholson said the authority and its municipal partners are working on a five-year plan based on the current mandates but factoring in the possibility the scale of work required will somehow be scaled back.

"There we are," he said. "It's quite a complicated issue."

Vincent Matteo, executive director of the Williamsport-Lycoming Chamber of Commerce put it a different way as he left the Rotary meeting.

He said the Chesapeake Bay strategy, like the proposed tolling of Interstate 80, could have a devastating impact on the area's economy.

If both go through, he added, "you can roll up the sidewalks."