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**Pros and cons of MSD plan for the project**

- Would relieve sewage overflow into area waterways.
- Would save money long-term in pumping sewage costs.
- Would create green space and opportunities for development.

**Against it**

- Would destroy about 80 to 100 businesses and homes forcing MSD to buy those properties.
- MSD would have to pay to re-locate those people and compensate those who remained.
- 20-25 historic properties would be bulldozed.

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**City envisions tree-lined, sewage-free stream**

**S. Fairmount’s Lick Run creek may flow again**

By Sharon Coolidge

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**SOUTH FAIRMOUNT — Great- er Cincinnati’s sewer agency has quietly buying up properties in this silting Cincinnati neighborhood with plans to turn a quarter of it into the stream it once was.**

The plan by the Metropolitan Sewer District and Cincinnati leaders is one of the most ambitious efforts in the nation to reduce the amount of sewage flowing into rivers. The idea is to let rainwater flow through the new stream in South Fairmount, while sewage flows in underground pipes.

The city and MSD have little choice. Federal environmental and U.S. Department of Justice officials have ordered MSD to find a way to separate its sewage from rainwater. They originally ordered MSD to build a $224 million underground pipeline.

MSD came up with a plan it believes will cost about half that and be greener and, as the agency hopes, will revitalize the neighborhood as well. Why not recreate Lick Run, the stream that used to run through South Fairmount?

The sewer district has spent the past year acquiring land along a two-mile stretch between Queen City and Westwood avenues. Under MSD’s vision, the 40 acres along the community’s busiest thoroughfare, could show about 100 crumbling historic homes and manufacturing businesses, will be raised and turned into a tree-lined, grassy creek.

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**Lick Run**

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Historic preservationists, however, say that demolishing the homes would be a “hugely architectural loss.”

To supporters, the plan solves several problems at once. It would be cheaper than building a new tunnel. That in turn would save MSD’s 280,000 customers money; their rates are rising to pay the estimated $1 billion in fines needed for the entire sewer system.

It’s a “green” solution, as opposed to what MSD refers to as a “gray” solution: laying pipes and a tunnel.

And it could help revitalize a struggling neighborhood that has lost 27 percent of its population over the past decade.

“I don’t normally get excited about sewer projects, but this one gets me all tingly,” said Cincinnati Mayor Mark Mallory, who mentioned the project publicly for the first time in his State of the City speech last month. “We talk about The Banks and Over-the-Rhine, but there is a tremendous opportunity to revitalize an otherwise forgotten community.”

The sewer district official in charge of the Lick Run project called it “a gateway to the West side.”

Among the project’s detractors: some local business owners, who aren’t happy about moving from an area that is close to highways and seen by thousands of Westside commuters every day.

Preservationists call some of the doomed buildings in South Fairmount historic treasures that should be saved.

Simply put, if the MSD project goes as planned, it will be the largest architectural loss for the city of Cincinnati since entire neighborhoods were demolished for the building of Interstate 71 in the 1960s, said Paul Wullfram, a preservationist who lives in the nearby Knox Hill neighborhood. “Other cities would kill to have a historic area like Fairmount, but we just don’t seem to get it.”

**An area home to 75 miles of streams, 600 miles of sewer lines**

In one way, MSD’s plan will return part of Greater Cincinnati to the way it was 100 years ago.

Then, the lower Mill Creek Valley — the area south of what is now Ronald Reagan Highway — was drained by 300 miles of streams. As the region developed, many of those streams were buried, channeled into underground sewers.

Today, that same area is home to 75 miles of streams and 600 miles of sewer lines. Those lines were built to carry combined sewage — rain and sewage — to treatment plants.

During heavy rains, there isn’t enough capacity in the pipes, the extra water escapes through overflow pipes and into rivers, streams and, occasionally, basements. Those so-called “combined sewer overflows” became a major headache for cities around the country, including Cincinnati. Under the 1972 Clean Water Act, that’s not allowed.

So in 2002, the U.S. EPA and the Ohio EPA used MSD for failing to comply with the law. After a decade of negotiations and project planning, Hamilton County and Cincinnati settled that lawsuit last August with a consent decree that requires MSD to remove at least 6 billion gallons of combined sewage from entering the lower Mill Creek.

**The EPA’s solution: a 1.2-mile-long tunnel, approximately 300 feet under the Mill Creek. The monster tunnel, 30 feet in diameter, would cost $244 million — and that was in 2006 dollars, when the plan was first proposed.**

Just to pump the water through that tunnel would cost $1.7 million a year, according to MSD. Running rainwater and runoff through the stream would cost one-tenth that amount because there’s no treatment plant or energy needs. All MSD has to do is maintain the pools and wetlands.

“That plan is not the most sustainable solution,” said Marylyn Luder, MSD’s environmental program manager. “A better solution is to go to the source of the problem.”

In this case, that’s through South Fairmount, because it’s the largest combined sewer overflow in the entire system, discharging an estimated 1.7 billion gallons a year of combined sewage into the Mill Creek, Luder said.

The MSD proposed “daylighting” the long-buried Lick Run. Daylighting means turning a stream that has been enclosed in a pipe into a naturally flowing, above-ground waterway — bringing it into the daylight.

If MSD gets its way, about one quarter of South Fairmount will be covered in water and green space by the end of 2018, MSD says. It’s just one project among many in MSD’s $3.2 billion upgrade of the region’s sewer system, which is expected to take decades.

If the project goes forward, MSD said, sewer service users will pay a $2.75 fee per month.

Sewer rates have soared over the past eight years to help pay for upgrades. The average user now pays $650.68 a year, up 90 percent since 2004 when homeowners paid $348.79 a year. It’s forecasted to go up another 8 percent in 2012.

Over the last 11/2 years, MSD has spent $1.2 million to purchase 20 out of the 130 parcels needed to pursue the water plan. Sewer officials say they are negotiating with land owners and hope to avoid using eminent domain to acquire properties in their way, but say eminent domain is a last resort.

Some property owners have already appealed to their local attorney C. Francis Barrett, who fights eminent domain attempts. Barrett said he expects some property owners will refuse to sell — and MSD will have to use eminent domain.

 MSD also has scooped up 84 extra properties on the property of the once future waterway. Those properties were a bargain, costing MSD $5,460 — 60 percent of transferring the title— since they came up for sale in the country’s frantic land sale.

City officials believe the extra land can be redeveloped as high-end waterfront properties.
South Fairmount is hoping project brings revitalization

South Fairmount residents and business owners interviewed for this story are resigning themselves to the fact that they are going to be in need of revitalization, Moore said. "We hope this is our opportunity, south of the line, in need of revitalization," Moore said. "We hope in our opportunity, south of the line, in need of revitalization." Moore added. "We hope this is our opportunity, south of the line, in need of revitalization." Moore added.

Moore, 34, in 2007 bought and fixed up a home that had been foreclosed on. In 2008, she got her master’s degree in community planning and development from the University of Cincinnati. She saw the neighborhood’s potential and got involved with the community council earlier this year.

"We want to make sure the people who want to stay can stay," Moore said. "This project is going to happen and we need to be in close collaboration with MSD ... and hopefully come out with a better community where the residents are happy." Moore said.

Jo Ann Metz, 85, grew up in South Fairmount and now lives on Queen City Avenue near the project site. She remembers her father telling her about a nearby farm that had run through to South Fairmount.

Even as a little girl she remembers rain cascading into the basement and flooding Queen City Avenue. That rain today may be the foundation for the future, she said.

She likes the idea of keeping back Lick Run.

"I think that’s too good to be true," she said. "If all this happens, it’s wondrous, because it takes care of the problems of the area." Moore added. Ultimately, the Lick Run project has been in the works for some time, and the city is finally getting it done.

A timeline of the project

2009: MSD, ordered by federal authorities to clean up sediment-laden creeks and streams and rivers, submitted a revised plan to deal with pollution from Lick Run. The plan was approved as well additional funding to study an attenuator to be built in the river. One alternative was discussed was turning back Lick Run. That study is still going on.

August 2010: A federal judge approved MSD’s consent decree, which requires MSD to remove at least 2 billion gallons of combined sewage from the Lower Lick Creek.

New MSD is evaluating alternative methods to treat the contaminated water in the Lower Lick Creek project.

December 2010: The project begins in January 2011 and will include the construction of a barrier to stop the flow of contaminated water into the Lower Lick Creek.

2012: The project is expected to be completed in 2012.

2013: The project is expected to be completed in 2013.

2014: The project is expected to be completed in 2014.

About S. Fairmount

The Cincinnati neighborhood of South Fairmount, located in the heart of the city, is a striking neighborhood. But it wasn’t always that way.

The town of Fairmont - named for farmers in the neighborhood's history - was a small community in the 1850s that was industrialized with a raucous, marble mines and breweries, according to the book "Cincinnati: A City of Mazes." It was home to the Cincinnati City and County Board of Commissioners in 1857. In 1860, the city was incorporated as the Village of Cincinnati, as it later split into North and South Fairmount neighborhoods.

"Queen City Avenue was the thriving commercial district," said Margaret Waring, preservationist for the Cincinnati Preservation Association. "South Fairmount has a strong German heritage, but it also drew French immigrants - seen in street names like Queen Road - and Italian immigrants who came to work in the original underground sewer in the early 1900s, according to the community plan.

The area is home to a number of restaurants, stores and food service establishments, including an Italian, a McDonald's and a United Dairy Farmers.

The United Dairy Farmers doesn’t want to move to Westwood Avenue in the future. "We’re here to stay, according to director of real estate Tim Kline.

"Exremely good store for us and we have a large interest in returning to the site," Kline said. "We understand the project is necessary and we support the efforts, but at the same time we're interested in what the area will look like and the opportunity for us to come back." The sewer district is paying to revitalize the businesses. So far, it’s spent $30,000 to do that.

Louis said MSD doesn’t have an estimate of how much it will cost to acquire the property because it’s unclear exactly what’s needed since the project design isn’t complete.

William, who has been writing regularly on his blog, Victorian Antiques and Design, is hoping to save around 30 properties, all built between 1840 and 1900, in the targeted demolition area.

Before any of the old buildings are destroyed, they will be reviewed by the city’s Urban Designers Office to see if they’re worth saving and, if so, how they can be saved.

William showed off the properties he considered worth saving during a recent walking tour. He pointed out a house with a Victorian porch with a creative use of brickwork.

The property was on a hill, but could be restored, William said. "Some of those properties could be hard to find a way to use them in the future, but who knows what the future will be like." William added.

"People will come here to see what we’ve done."