

Pros and cons of MSD plan FOR THE PROJECT

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

AGAINST IT

- Would destroy about 80 to 100 businesses and homes, requiring MSD to buy those properties.
- MSD would have to pay to relocate those people and companies.
- 20-25 historic properties would be bulldozed.



City envisions tree-lined, sewage-free stream

S. Fairmount's Lick Run creek may flow again



The Enquirer/Jeff Swinger

Not everyone is convinced, though. Paul Willham worries that historic South Fairmount buildings, some dating to the 1840s, would be sacrificed for MSD's plan to restore Lick Run.

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A ONCE-VIBRANT NEIGHBORHOOD

SOUTH FAIRMOUNT – Greater Cincinnati's sewer agency has quietly been buying up properties in this ailing 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: let rain water 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 rain water. They originally ordered MSD to build a \$244 million underground pipeline.

But MSD came up with a plan it believes will cost about half that and be greener – and, the agency hopes, will revitalize the neighborhood as

- A look back at South Fairmount's vibrant past. **A4**
- A timeline of MSD's orders, its proposal and potential completion dates. **A4**
- How to weigh in. **A4**

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, home to about 100 crumbling historic homes and manufacturing businesses, will be razed 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 "huge architectural loss."

To supporters, the plan solves several problems at once. It would be cheaper than building a new tunnel. That in turn could save MSD's 800,000 customers money; their rates are rising to pay the estimated \$3 billion in fixes 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 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 West Side commuters every day.

And 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 75 in the 1960s, said Paul Willham, a preservationist who lives in the nearby Knox Hill neighborhood. "Other cities would kill to have a historic area like Fairmount, but we just do not seem to get it."

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

In one way, MSD's plan would 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 sued 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 2 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 MaryLynn Lodor, MSD's environmental program manager. "A better solution is to go 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, Lodor 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 sewer users will pay for it.

Sewer rates have soared over the last eight years to help pay for upgrades. The average user now pays \$663.68 a year, up 90 percent since 2004 when homeowners paid \$348.76 a year. It's forecasted to go up another 8 percent in 2012.

Over the last 1½ years, MSD has spent \$1.2 million to purchase 20 out of the 80 to 100 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; they say eminent domain is a last resort.

Some property owners have already spoken to property rights 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 periphery of the once and future waterway. Those properties were a bargain, costing MSD \$3,465 – just the cost of transferring the title – since they came up for sale in the county's forfeited land sale.

City officials believe the extra land can be redeveloped as high-end riverfront properties.



The Enquirer/Jeff Swinger

South Fairmount is hoping project brings revitalization

South Fairmount residents and business owners interviewed for this story are resigned to the project – and even hopeful.

LaToya Moore, who chairs the South Fairmount Community Council's development committee, said early on in the project there was secrecy and confusion from MSD, but now the community is working alongside the sewer district. The MSD held an open house in January about the project.

"It's no secret the community is in need of revitalization," Moore said. "We hope this is our opportunity to do it."

Moore, 28, 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."

Jo Ann Metz, 82, grew up in South Fairmount and now lives on Queen City Avenue near the project site. She remembers her father telling her about a stream that used to run through South Fairmount.

Even as a little girl she remembers rain cascading down the hills and flooding Queen City Avenue. That rain today means that sometimes sewage backs up into her basement and the two rental homes she owns next door.

She likes the idea of bringing back Lick Run.

"It's almost too good to be true," she said. "If all this happens, it's win-win, because it takes care of the problems and it improves the neighborhood."

Ultimately, the Lick Run project

must be approved by the U.S. EPA and Ohio EPA. And while neither EPA has signed off on the plan, federal EPA officials have signaled they like it – calling it "promising" in a recent memo advocating using more "green infrastructure" to protect water quality.

U.S. EPA spokeswoman Phillipa Cannon said her agency is working with MSD, but the plan is still in the early stages and it's too soon to say whether it would be approved.

Ohio EPA spokeswoman Heather Lauer said typically the EPA has supported anything that returns a stream to a more natural flow.

Margo Warminski, preservation director for the Cincinnati Preservation Association, said the project has tremendous potential to revitalize the neighborhood – but only if historic properties are saved.

"Preservation needs to be a part of the mix and it really isn't right now," she said. "The project needs to build on the historic buildings of the area, rather than wipe them out."

Business owners are working with MSD to get a fair price for their property. Twenty-four formed the South Fairmount Business Association to keep informed and better work with MSD.

"What they're going to do for sure we don't know, but I do think they're going to clear it out if they get the approval and they get money," said Dennis Smith, president of the business association and owner of Paper Products Co., which under his father's ownership moved to South Fairmount in 1947. It started with one building and now operates out of three.

"This has been part of my whole life and I will be sad to move," Smith said. "But we're looking forward to the future with a lot of enthusiasm."

Joe Thoman, who brought his moving business, Weil Thoman Moving and Storage, to the neighborhood in 1965, said South Fairmount is the perfect location for his company because it is close to major highways and highly visible on the busy street.

"We understand the need to have the property and we accept it," Thoman

said. "We just hope there is fair treatment of the property owners."

The area is home to a handful of convenience stores and fast-food restaurants, including an Arby's, a McDonald's and a United Dairy Farmers.

The United Dairy Farmers doesn't want to leave, according to director of real estate Tim Kling.

"Extremely good store for us and we have a large interest in returning to the site," Kling said. "We understand the project is necessary and we support their 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 relocate the businesses. So far, it's spent \$30,000 to do that.

Lodor 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.

Willham, who has been writing about the project in recent months on his blog, Victorian Antiquities and Design, is hoping to save about 20 properties, all built between 1840 and 1930, in the targeted demolition area.

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

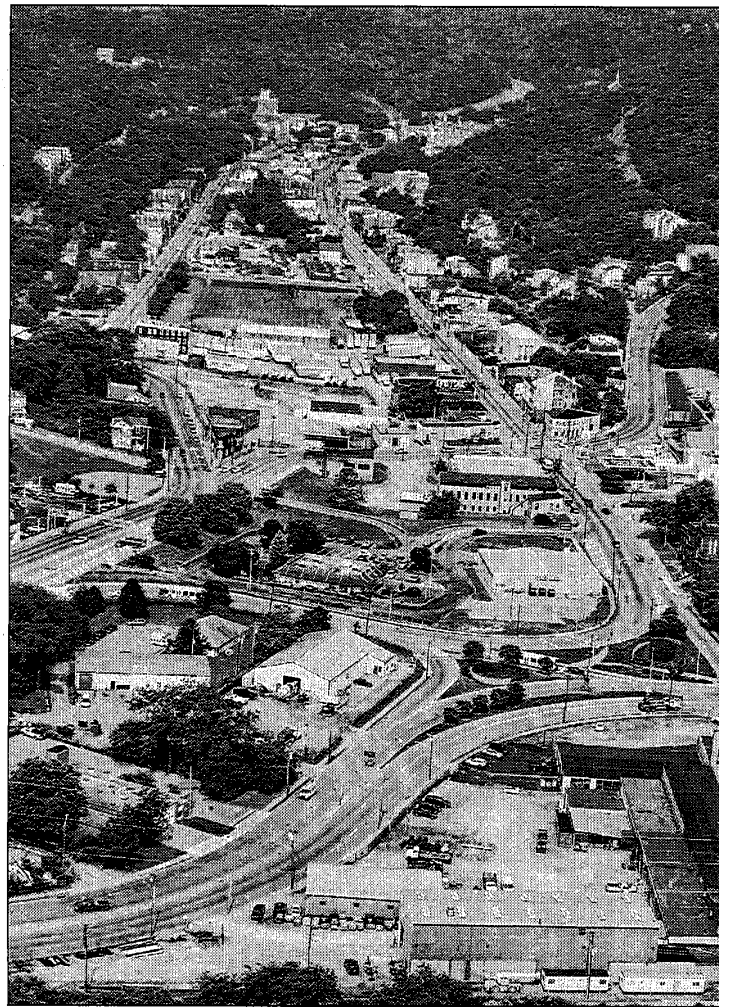
Willham showed off the properties he considered worth saving during a recent walking tour, pointing out rare tin work embellishments, stained-glass windows and intricately patterned brick. The properties were rundown, but could be restored, Willham said.

Mallory said it might be hard for some to visualize the project, especially for people unfamiliar with the area.

But he pointed to other transformative projects as examples of change.

"South Fairmount is the riverfront before the professional sports stadiums or what 3CDC is doing in Over-the-Rhine," Mallory said. "This is going to be a national model, looked at across the country as a best practice."

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



An aerial view of the area looking west. Westwood Avenue is on the left. Queen City Avenue, the area's major thoroughfare, is on the right.

View more photos of South Fairmount

- See a gallery of South Fairmount at Cincinnati.com. Search: photos.
- Read past stories on the Metropolitan Sewer District's plan to fix its sewer overflows, at Cincinnati.com. Search: msd.
- The Enquirer plans further stories on this subject. If you have questions or story suggestions, email reporter Sharon Coolidge at scoolidge@enquirer.com or Government/Public Affairs editor Carl Weiser at cweiser@enquirer.com.

A timeline of the project

2009: MSD, ordered by federal authorities to clean pollution from area streams and rivers, submitted a revised plan to do that. It included the giant tunnel under the lower Mill Creek. Federal authorities gave MSD conditional approval as well additional time to study an alternative to the tunnel. One alternative discussed was bringing back Lick Run. That study is still going on.

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

Now: MSD is evaluating alternatives to the tunnel project. By the end of year, it hopes to submit a preliminary plan to the Hamilton County Board of Commissioners, who will decide what the plan should include. MSD must prove to the EPA it has the land to make the project

work. To that end, it will continue to obtain community input and buy land that can be used to help reduce overflows.

December 2012: Submit the plan to the EPA for approval. Wait for EPA response.

IF APPROVED, tentative schedule:

2013: Finalize plan details.

2015: Start construction.

2018: Complete project, achieving a 2 billion-gallon overflow reduction in the lower Mill Creek.

ABOUT S. FAIRMOUNT

The Cincinnati neighborhood of South Fairmount, northwest of the city's core, is a struggling neighborhood. But it wasn't always that way.

The town of Fairmount – named for Fairmount Park in Philadelphia – began as a farming community in the 1800s and later was industrialized with a railyard, valve makers and breweries, according to the book "Cincinnati 1788-1943: A Guide to the Queen City and its neighbors," produced by the Cincinnati Historical Society.

Since it was unincorporated, Cincinnati businessmen flocked to the area to avoid taxes, according to a history put out by the South Fairmount Community Planning Committee in 1976.

In 1870, it was annexed into the city of Cincinnati. It was later split into North, South and Central Fairmounts.



Jeff Swinger

"Queen City Avenue was a thriving commercial district," said Margo Warminski, preservation director for the Cincinnati Preservation Association.

South Fairmount has a strong German heri-

tage, but it also drew French immigrants – seen in street names like Quebec Road – and Italian immigrants who came to work on the original underground sewer in the early 1900s, according to the community plan.



Warminski

MSD's plan calls for leveling some of South Fairmount's buildings.

By the 1950s, companies were closing their doors. Without jobs nearby, people left, Warminski said.

"It wasn't just South Fairmount; people were moving out of the core Cincinnati neighborhoods and moving up into Western Hills."

Churches and schools closed. Property shifted from families into the hands of absentee landlords.

A drive through the area today still offers a view of Cincinnati's downtown, but also shows boarded-up and decaying buildings.

New census data shows the neighborhood lost 27 percent of its population, dropping to 2,368 residents.

Since 2005, the city has bulldozed 69 properties. Since 2006, another 146 properties have been condemned.

A recent property valuation showed that an average property in South Fairmount had lost 7 percent of its total value between 2010 and 2011.

Where the stream would flow

Metropolitan Sewer District has purchased or has the option to purchase several properties to make way for the proposed Lick Run stream project in South Fairmount.

- A. 1925 Queen City Ave.
- B. 1933 Queen City Ave.
- C. 1913 Queen City Ave.
- D. 1911 Queen City Ave.
- E. 1907 Queen City Ave.

- F. 1893 Queen City Ave.
- G. 1891 Queen City Ave.
- H. 2345 Quebec Rd.
- I. 1926 Westwood Ave.
- J. 1924 Westwood Ave.

- K. 1803 Queen City Ave.
- L. 1810 Westwood Ave.
- M. 1802 Westwood Ave. (option)
- N. 1798 Westwood (option)
- O. 1789 Queen City Ave.

- P. 1786 Westwood Ave. (option)
- Q. 1784 Westwood Ave. (option)
- R. 1773 Queen City Ave.
- S. 1771 Queen City Ave.
- T. 1769 Queen City Ave.

- U. 1749 Queen City Ave.
- V. 1747 Queen City Ave.
- W. 1565 Harrison Ave.
- X. 1563 Harrison Ave.



Source: Metropolitan Sewer District

The Enquirer/Mike Nyerges