

OMAHA (KPTM)- One idea for the federal stimulus plan: money for Omaha's massive sewer overhaul. It's something Congressman Lee Terry has been pushing as the bill moves through Congress. This is no small undertaking. Omaha is looking at a 15-year project to separate a good chunk of its sewer system.

The price tag is an estimated \$1.5 billion. The federal government says it has to be done, but that Omaha has to pay for it. One of the major focuses of President Obama's stimulus package is public works projects, so Terry wondered why not use some of the money for sewers? "The focus was infrastructure to create jobs and to retain jobs within an industry," says Terry. "So it fits perfectly." It didn't happen in the House. But Terry was hopeful for a Senate amendment that would have created a \$15 billion sewer fund. That amendment failed.

"We're still hopeful that we can get some of it," says Terry. "There's some sewer money in there, but you know it would maybe turn out to be a couple million dollars for Omaha." A relative drop in the bucket when you think about an estimated \$1.5 billion total. "I think most people will agree that the CSO program is the single largest infrastructure project that has ever taken place in Omaha or perhaps the state of Nebraska," says City of Omaha Environmental Services Manager Marty Grate.

Most of Omaha's older sewer systems east of 72nd Street are combined, meaning sewage and storm water flow together. During heavy rainfall or snow melt treatment plants can't handle it all so a combination of sewage and storm water overflow into the Missouri River, Papillion Creek, or even some people's basements.

The 15-year overhaul will include some sewer separation and new methods to control overflows. "Certainly we appreciate any assistance we can get from the federal government on this mandate," says Grate. Terry says he'll keep trying, and while the chances aren't good he hasn't completely given up on stimulus money. "Maybe a city the size of Omaha that would have been \$200 million," says Terry. "I mean that's 20 percent of the project then. That's big for the taxpayers of Omaha." The less federal money that comes in, the more Omaha taxpayers will feel this.

Right now the average homeowner pays about \$13 a month for sewer service. By the time this project is done, that rate could be more than \$50 a month. Omaha is one of at least 750 communities that have been ordered to fix their sewers by the Environmental Protection Agency. Many of those cities are also looking for federal help. With everyone focused on the massive bill to fix Omaha's sewers, the health impact might get overlooked.

Today community activist Rose Hunte-Roberson met with Congressman Terry to ask questions about the sewer overhaul. She also wanted to support Terry's efforts to get federal money for the project, which she says is essential to preserving Omaha's health. "We're getting short on shall we say drinkable water on this planet as a whole," says Hunte-Roberson. "So rainwater is a very very essential component for us for the future, for now and the future, so the last thing we want to do is have sewage running off into rainwater."

Terry says most of the people he's spoken with seem to understand the need for the project, even if they're not thrilled about the cost.

