

# Water Dist. may soon make power out of poop

*Caution urged with new recreational uses of Chicago River*

BY PATRICK BUTLER

Fresh water, like that found in Lake Michigan, will be tomorrow's liquid gold the same way oil is today and few agencies are doing more to maximize that asset than Chicago's Metropolitan Water Reclamation District, Patrick Daley Thompson told the Lake View Kiwanis Club last week.

Thompson, an MWRD commissioner and the Buena Park-born grandson of Mayor Richard J. Daley, told the local civic leaders' at the April 3 luncheon at Ann Sather's Restaurant, 909 W. Belmont, that Chicagoland is now one of the first regions in the world to treat waste water and extract methane gas from the "effluent" to produce electricity.

"We're going to start disinfection, the next level, in the near future," he said. "But 'it still gets sent down the river.' Contrary to what some people believe, we don't recycle the water and put it back in the lake... we move about 90 million gallons [of waste] a day," added Thompson.

"Before we just flushed the waste water through the canal to the Illinois River, then down the Mississippi to the Gulf of Mexico," he said.

That didn't endear Chicago to down-river cities like St. Louis, which once actually sued Chicago over the action in federal court. "The judge asked St. Louis what they did with their waste. When they said they also released it into the river, the judge found in Chicago's favor," Thompson said.

But while Thompson sees no public health perils at this point, even though Chicago has a large body of fresh water in easy reach, "we're going to have to start thinking about conservation and perhaps start using some of the rain water like they already do in cities like Los Angeles or San Antonio where they have water shortages," he said.

But all this doesn't come cheap, Thompson said. "We spend about \$50 million a year on electricity processing our waste water" and the commission is exploring the possibility of private/public partnerships to generate money for the reclamation district,

which now comes mostly from real estate taxes.

Using the methane gas to generate electricity at a small power plant within the system is one option that may be undertaken soon.

Also being explored, he said, are ways to more safely and efficiently dispose of pharmaceuticals that until now were mostly flushed down toilets, creating a host of potential health hazards for fish and wildlife who also use our rivers.

On April 27, Chicagoans will have a chance to turn in their unused drugs at various locations and legislation is pending to allow unwanted pharmaceutical drop-offs at local pharmacies, Thompson said.

The reclamation district got into storm water management in 2004, "which makes sense because we built and operate the Deep Tunnel," he said. Even with the Deep Tunnel, "we sometimes have to open the sewers and release the overflow," something "we don't see as much in Lake View as elsewhere because of the improvements we've done along the North Branch of the River."

He said the system can now handle up to 1.9 billion gallons of waste water in one incident, but volumes over that creates problems.

And while civic boosters often talk about people someday being able to swim in the river, Thompson told his listeners not to jump in anytime soon - even though County Board President Toni Preckwinkle suffered no ill effects after falling in the river a few years ago. He cautioned folks on the ever more popular recreational uses of the river including kayaking and canoeing. "It's OK to let the warded get on you but you should do your best to not swallow any of it if you fall in."

"My grandfather wanted to see people fishing in the river, but he never said he was going to eat any of the fish that were caught," he chuckled.



Patrick Daley Thompson