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State gives green light to Omaha sewer plan The 15-year project will cost \$1.66 billion but will mean cleaner waterways, fewer backups and lots of construction jobs.

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It's a dirty job, and Omaha is set to do it. The city now has final state approval to carry out a \$1.66 billion plan to clean up **water** sources and reduce **sewer** backups into people's basements.

Although certain bothersome construction and **sewer** overhaul work already has started, the approval Friday by the Nebraska Department of Environmental Quality marks a major milestone in a costly process that will continue for the next 15 years.

"We would hate to be in a position where we spend this amount of money hoping that in the end the state might be satisfied," said Marty Grate, the city's environmental services manager.

Now full-speed ahead, the **project** mandated to meet **federal** clean **water** requirements calls for **sewer** separation in dozens of eastern Omaha neighborhoods, two new treatment plants and a 5.4-mile tunnel along the Missouri River.

It also includes construction of a 1.5-mile pipeline designed to send **water** from northeast Omaha storm **sewers** to the river.

Most obvious to Omaha residents will be torn-up streets east of 72nd Street to allow installation of new **sewers**. The streets then would be repaved.

The cost will be shared not only by households throughout Omaha but also by surrounding communities connected to Omaha's **sewer** system, including Gretna, Papillion, Bellevue, Ralston and Carter Lake. About 600,000 people are served by Omaha's **sewer** system.

Sewer use fees will rise most rapidly through 2014, said Grate. In 2017, a typical household that now pays \$15 a month in **sewer** fees would pay more than \$50 a month. Those fees are included on the Metropolitan Utilities District bill.

Grate said the city has tried to avoid sugarcoating the expense, inconvenience and disruption of the **project**. In the end, he said, the region will benefit from cleaner **water**, fewer **sewer** backups and improved infrastructure.

And in the meantime, Grate said, there will be jobs to be had.

"Certainly with all this work going on there will be an economic stimulus effect," he said. "We'll be creating jobs."

The **project**, mandated by the **federal Clean Water Act**, is designed to ensure that less raw sewage is dumped into local streams and rivers. About 770 other cities also were required to reduce **sewer** system overflows.

Omaha's problem stems from its combined **sewer** system, which carries sewage as well as rain **water**. When it rains one-tenth of an inch or more, the system can get overwhelmed. Contaminated **water** then dumps into the Missouri River and Papillion Creek.

The city primarily has combined **sewers** east of 72nd Street. The lines are separated in western parts of the city.

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