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Michigan Senate OKs \$5M Sinkhole Loan, Allots Flint Funds.

LANSING, Mich. — The Michigan Senate on Wednesday approved a \$5 million interest-free state loan to help repair a large sinkhole in suburban Detroit, narrowly rejecting a call to stick with a House plan that would instead give Macomb County a \$3 million infrastructure grant.

The midyear budget bill, which also would formally allot \$100 million in federal aid toward Flint's water crisis, cleared the Republican-controlled chamber 36-1. Democrats and some Republicans from Macomb County and elsewhere unsuccessfully tried to reinstate the proposed grant, which had been overwhelmingly endorsed by the GOP-led House last week.

"It's their problem to solve," Republican Senate Majority Leader Arlan Meekhof said of Macomb County. "I'm happy to give them a no-interest loan, which we did. But I'm not interested in having the line out my door go forever for people that want to get in line for free money for their infrastructure."

A broken sewer line caused the football field-sized sinkhole on Christmas Eve in Fraser. Three houses had to be condemned and a major road has been closed.

Macomb County Public Works Commissioner Candice Miller, a former Republican congresswoman, called Meekhof "pompous and arrogant" and accused him of standing in the way of a project designed to keep raw sewage out of 150,000 basements and the Great Lakes.

"He has the wrong job title. He's not a leader," she said in a statement that also credited the House and the governor's office. "Term limits can't come fast enough for some people. ... If I had \$5 million to pay him back, I wouldn't need the money in the first place."

Meekhof spokeswoman Amber McCann countered that Miller "spent too much time in Washington" and "doesn't get to dictate the terms" of the assistance.

"The majority leader and 35 other senators voted to help fix the problem," she said.

Sen. Steve Bieda, a Warren Democrat, voted against the legislation after his amendment to issue a grant rather than a loan failed 17-20. He said the sinkhole has had a broad impact because millions of gallons of sewage were discharged into a river.

"This is an issue that affects everybody, as it stands to negatively impact the Great Lakes," Bieda said. "And it's one that needs to be fixed in the near future as the rains that are anticipated in April will only exacerbate the problem."

The \$3 million grant would offset the cost of a \$12 million-plus pipe system that was installed to divert sewage around the collapsed sewer interceptor, according to Macomb officials. A local drainage district will sell municipal bonds to finance the cost of emergency work on the damaged pipe, Miller said.

The bill also would allocate \$100 million in Flint aid that Congress and former President Barack Obama enacted into law in December. And it includes \$1 million for capital improvements to the Michigan Capitol building.

Sen. Tory Rocca, a Sterling Heights Republican, was angered by the GOP majority's decision to authorize a loan instead of a grant.

"Year after year you come to my county for money. And now when we need a little bit of help and a tiny bit of our money back, people are pretty hostile to that. It doesn't seem right," he said.

It is unclear how the House will respond. It is expected to vote Thursday, before the Legislature's two-week spring break.

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

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