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The Atlanta Journal and Constitution

April 19, 1993, Monday

## City flushing \$ 107 million down drain? EPA calls sewage overflow fix a 'waste of money'

**BYLINE:** By Scott Bronstein STAFF WRITERwater; wastes; environment; aid; costs; Atlanta; cities; politics; government;

**SECTION:** LOCAL NEWS; Section B; Page 1

**LENGTH:** 960 words

Atlanta is spending \$ 107 million on construction projects to solve the city's sewage overflow problem that when completed will likely fail to meet current or future water-quality standards, according to documents and officials at the federal Environmental Protection Agency.

Today, with every heavy rain a river of untreated human excrement, tampons, condoms and toilet paper flows through several city parks and eventually into the Chattahoochee River because the city's aging sewer system can't handle combined rainwater and sewage.

The resulting pollution poses a health hazard for communities downstream and neighboring states that use the water, such as Alabama and Florida. If Atlanta's water violates the standards, the city could face severe fines.

It has already been paying a \$ 1,000 state fine every day since January for delaying construction on its chosen solution.

To pay for modernizing the sewers, the average sewer and water bill in Atlanta is expected to rise by as much as \$ 12 a month over the next three years.

Probably won't fix problem

But even when the new sewage overflow plants are completed, untreated city sewage and excrement likely will still flow through the system and pollute water downstream in direct violation of federal and state laws, according to internal EPA documents and interviews with agency officials.

"I cannot agree with the approach they're taking," said Richard Field, EPA's chief of research on sewer programs.

"What they want to do - it doesn't seem like it will fix the problem," he said. "It seems to me like a waste of money."

One of EPA's Atlanta water experts, Jim Harrison, reviewed the city's permit last year and wrote an internal memo now on file at EPA.

His conclusion: "In my opinion the proposed permit will not result in meeting existing [or future] water quality standards for the affected streams. . . ."

Council may vote next week

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"It is also my opinion that violations of proper effluent limits are likely. The apparent design of the CSO [combined sewage overflow] facilities allows, at times, discharge of untreated waste, and envisions only partial treatment" of some biological pollutants "while not addressing other important" pollutants, such as "ammonia, phosphorus, heavy metals," he wrote.

The city plans five new mini-treatment plants across the city. City Council members may vote next week on whether to go on with the projects.

Three plants are already under construction at Tanyard Creek, North Avenue and Greensferry. Construction has not started at the two remaining plants - on Clear Creek at Piedmont Park and on Utoy Creek at John A. White Park.

As designed, the five mini-plants would take the combined sewage and storm-water runoff, pass it through screens to remove anything larger than 5 millimeters, and then pass the rest through a chlorine wash.

The concern is that the screens would still allow pieces of human excrement to pass, and the chlorine would likely not completely kill all disease-causing bacteria.

Hazardous metals ignored

What's more, the chlorine actually produces toxic waste byproducts that are themselves a serious pollutant. If chlorine is used, EPA officials suggest that the city take the extra step of removing it from the water to meet state water standards. The city, however, has chosen not to dechlorinate, either.

Finally, pollution from toxic or hazardous metals, such as lead, arsenic, chromium and cadmium, which have all shown up in elevated levels from city discharges, will not be addressed at all in the new plants.

While some of the EPA concerns were passed on to state regulators, the harshest criticism remained an internal matter for EPA files. Even the milder criticism was largely ignored in the final permit approved by Harold Reheis, director of the state's Environmental Protection Division.

State efforts condemned

Federal investigators have condemned state efforts to regulate CSOs.

"Actions taken by the State actually encouraged CSO owners to violate the Clean Water Act," Mary M. Boyer, the EPA divisional inspector general, concluded in a 1990 report. "For several years, the State illegally waived its water quality standards for segments of the Chattahoochee River during periods when water quality was adversely impacted by CSO discharges."

Officials from the city's bureau of pollution control say their plan is the "best solution" for the city's sewer problems.

"This program has been carefully developed by professionals who have done environmental work for their whole careers," said George D. Barnes, director of the city's bureau of pollution control. "The plan we're putting into effect would allow us to meet the permit issued to us."

City officials say the projects must continue on track to avoid the daily fines they are now paying.

Those fines could get worse, state officials say, and a possible moratorium on future sewer hookups may be imposed if the city does not show it is serious about cleaning up the problem.

"The city is basically between a rock and a hard place," said City Council member Mary Davis, chairwoman of the city Utilities Committee, which is trying to prepare the council with information for a possible vote on the remaining two facilities not yet under construction.

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Ms. Davis said that, although she has heard some criticisms about the technology, she was unaware that EPA scientists reviewing the permit had voiced such serious concerns. She also wonders why the state still supports the project.

"We've already spent a lot of money going down one path. It seems unfair for the state government to tell the city to do something, and to even mandate that the city cure a problem one way, if it's in fact not the right way to do it."

**LOAD-DATE:** May 3, 1993

**LANGUAGE:** ENGLISH931230025

**GRAPHIC:** Color Photo: No stream of dreams: A bush in the concrete-lined creek through Piedmont Park is covered with material trapped from the sewage overflow last Tuesday during heavy rain. / DWIGHT ROSS JR. / Staff Map: Combined sewage over flow plants in the works North Avenue CSO runs into Proctor Creek, then into the Chattahoochee River. Cost: \$ 5.29 million Proctor Creek-Greensferry CSO runs into Proctor Creek, then into the Chattahoochee River. Cost: \$ 6.57 million Tanyard Creek CSO runs into Tanyard Creek, then into Peachtree Creek. Cost: 46.6 million Utoy Creek CSO runs into North Utoy Creek, then into the Chattahoochee River. Cost: \$ 34 million Clear Creek CSO runs into Clear Creek, then Peachtree Creek. Cost: \$ 55 million

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