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## **TROUBLED WATERS: The Strangling of the Chattahoochee FIRST OF 2 PARTS CNN, The Atlanta Journal, THE ATLANTA CONSTITUTION A SICK RIVER RUNS THROUGH IT**

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Human filth chokes the Chattahoochee - Atlanta's primary wasteway. One reason: The city has one of the worst sewer systems in the country.

Atlanta has a dirty secret.

Every time it rains, toilets flush directly into the city's premier park.

One inch of precipitation sends 220 million gallons of raw sewage coursing through the heart of Piedmont Park. Then it pours into the Chattahoochee River - the drinking water source for one-third of Georgia's population and for millions in Alabama and Florida.

It is enough raw sewage overflow to fill 220 Olympic-size swimming pools.

As the tributary waters recede, tree branches at stream's edge reappear, newly shrouded in soggy toilet paper, condoms and tampon streamers.

The overflow is in direct violation of the nation's Clean Water Act. And it has gone on for decades.

Since 1992, city taxpayers have been paying a premium to keep the sewage flowing through their parks and by their back yards. For plopping the equivalent of three or four 32,000-ton dump-truck loads of raw sewage sludge into the Chattahoochee each week, the city has been paying daily fines to the state of up to \$ 8,000.

Atlanta's environmental assault on its primary water resource is illustrative of the national struggle in which cities are engaged, as they try to strike a balance between the demands of growth and the increasing financial burden of meeting clean water laws.

Sewage is but one front in the assault. Erosion from rampant development and toxic runoff are others.

'Third-rate sewage system'

Downstream, people are not pleased.

"Atlanta is a major American city with a Third World, third-rate sewage disposal system. It's an abomination. It's a disgrace," said Wade Milam, a state representative from LaGrange, one of the first communities downstream of Atlanta

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that pulls its drinking water from the river.

The federal Clean Water Act was passed in 1972. It called for our rivers, lakes and streams to be "fishable and swimmable" by July 1, 1983. Today, 40 percent of our waterways still fail that test, according to Carol M. Browner, the administrator of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Georgia's Chattahoochee River is one of the failures.

This year, Congress had planned to reauthorize the Clean Water Act. It is trying to decide whether we should go further, or stop and declare that our waterways are as clean as we can afford.

Nationwide, and on the Chattahoochee, there has been much progress in two decades. Industrial polluters were forced to drastically reduce their discharges into rivers. The water is cleaner by many measures.

Many municipalities, however, have been slow to reform.

An estimated 1,100 U.S. towns and cities still have a sewer overflow problem, according to the EPA. The problems are worse in the North than in Southern cities, but Atlanta is among the worst in the country.

Antiquated system

The city's sewage problems date to the 1800s, when pipes were built to move sewage waste and storm-water runoff away from inhabited areas, toward rivers.

Sanitary treatment plants were added later. Today they, too, are antiquated and often unable to handle sewage and storm water when it rains.

Whenever it rains hard, more than 50 days most years, the combined storm and sewer pipes overflow, like a backed-up toilet. The sewage overflow in Atlanta gurgles up from eight overflow pipes across the city. The largest is in Piedmont Park. The overflow surges into tributary streams flowing through rich and poor neighborhoods.

Five of the overflows dump out eventually into the Chattahoochee. The three others empty into the South River.

Piedmont's 'health hazard'

Some weeks ago, a festival drew crowds to Piedmont Park to learn, among other things, how to be more environmentally aware.

En route to the tents and displays, dozens of people walked across a stream trickling through an open overflow gully. Some waded in bare feet. Hours before, it had been filled with raw sewage.

Far down the gully, out of sight of most people, was a sign that read:

"Warning - Health Hazard. Do not enter this area. Pollution poses the risk of disease transmission."

"I was down there barefoot and wasn't even aware of what it was," said Amy Stops, an Atlanta credit officer, visiting the park with her husband and 1-year-old baby. "I would never have been down there if I had known."

State and federal environmental regulators have been aware of the problem for decades. Fulton County was embarrassed into posting the signs five years ago.

But for years, regulatory authorities did very little to solve the problem.

A March 1990 audit by the EPA Inspector General's office concluded that the Atlanta regional EPA office "did not

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properly discharge its responsibility to regulate CSOs [combined sewage overflows] in accordance with the Clean Water Act.

"Other actions taken by the state actually encouraged CSO owners to violate the Clean Water Act," the auditors wrote.

Alan Hallum, chief of the water branch for Georgia's Environmental Protection Division, says the reality is that there were even worse problems.

"Atlanta, and other cities, have had sewage overflows for more than 50 years," Hallum said. "In the 1970s and 1980s, our resources were directed toward getting the sewage treatment plants themselves in compliance with their permits. That's where our resources were going. The CSOs were a secondary priority."

In August 1991, the head of the EPD, Harold Reheis, warned Mayor Maynard Jackson that the state would be unforgiving if the city missed a 1993 deadline to fix its problem. He said a failure to meet the deadline would bring daily fines of \$ 100,000 and a moratorium on new sewer hookups.

"The city is on a very tight schedule, and I will impose the sewer connection moratorium if the deadline is not met," he said. "This would be a severe blow to the city's program to construct facilities needed for the '96 Olympics."

Atlanta missed the deadline, but the moratorium was never imposed, and the fines finally given were considerably less than those threatened.

Atlanta has been paying the state about \$ 22,000 every week for its infractions, a total of \$ 1.6 million since December 1992.

"I don't think increasing the fines would have made the city move any faster," Hallum said. "They're paying a substantial amount of money now and are very aware of the need to fix their problem."

In part, political realities are the reason punishment for the city's cleanup failures has been meted out sparingly: Metro Atlanta is the economic machine that pumps the state's economy, and no one wants to shut down the machine.

"The city has shown they're not going to do a thing except when they're forced to," said David Barrow, executive director of the Chattahoochee-Flint regional development center, which represents five counties below Atlanta. "We had long hoped state officials would issue a halt to sewer hookups, as they threatened. But apparently the politics are such that they don't feel they can do that."

While the communities sipping from the Chattahoochee downstream take the brunt of Atlanta's sewage overflow, the tributaries that carry dirty water for the metro area have also been profoundly affected.

Federal scientists have determined that a half-dozen smaller tributaries around Atlanta are nearly dead, unable to support most fish or aquatic life.

"I wouldn't call these waterways totally dead, because there are animals that will live anywhere. But they are close," said aquatic biologist Carol A. Couch of the U.S. Geological Survey.

Testing for diversity of fish and insect species at Peachtree Creek, where much of the sewage dumps, for example, proved very disappointing, she said. And at Utoy Creek, only a few fish were found, and those had lesions or ulcers.

"Many of these streams are not healthy, by any stretch of the imagination," Couch said. "I would have to call them biological deserts."

Federal scientists believe that the water quality in these tributaries has been getting steadily worse in recent years, as the runoff of chemicals and sediment from increased development compounds the problems caused by sewage overflow.

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Jerry Garrett is another scientist from the U.S. Geological Survey team. Standing beside Peachtree Creek, which receives the sewage from Piedmont Park, he mused:

"People always stop and ask us, 'How's the water? Can the dog swim in it?'

"I never know what to say to them, really. I mean, geez, I sure wouldn't let my dog near it."

Sally Bethea, the Chattahoochee Riverkeeper, a citizen advocate hired to protect the river, took a walk to see the results of a rain in Clear Creek, just below Piedmont Park.

"I'm shocked," she said. "And I'm embarrassed a city like Atlanta, which is hosting the Olympics, would have allowed something like this to happen, and continue for so long."

Closing in on solution

Atlanta Mayor Bill Campbell agrees that the problem has long gone ignored but says his administration is closing in on the solution.

Some other cities grappling with the problem are undertaking billion-dollar tunnel construction projects, but Atlanta is trying to solve its problems with an estimated \$ 107 million.

The city's answer is to build mini pseudo-treatment plants where raw sewage and storm-water runoff will be sprayed with chlorine and larger chunks will be separated or screened out before the water is allowed to travel downstream to the Chattahoochee.

At a time when the city's century-old sewer lines are themselves crumbling and the city is trying to sell voters on the need to authorize a \$ 150 million bond issue for infrastructure repair, cost is clearly a consideration.

"People don't want to see their water rates increased, but they want the same level of services," Campbell said. "We must accept some responsibility for not moving quicker . . . but we've done the best we could under difficult circumstances."

Those circumstances have included vigorous opposition from neighborhood and environmental groups to some other - more ambitious, more expensive and more controversial - solutions proposed by the city. An Atlanta waste-water tunnel project is stalled as city officials search for cheaper and more politically palatable alternatives.

Atlanta officials had promised the EPA that their small spray treatment facilities would be under construction in 1992 and finished by the end of 1993.

Three of the five that dump into the Chattahoochee are built, and will soon be operating full time. The other two have yet to break ground, though construction at Piedmont Park is expected to start this summer. City officials hope they can be finished by the summer of '96.

'We're basically trusting them'

Whether Atlanta's low-cost sewage solution will work remains a much-debated question. EPD officials support the plan.

"We don't have any concerns about Atlanta's solution," Hallum said. "We're basically trusting them."

Officially, the EPA also supports the city's approach.

But in internal evaluations, federal authorities have been less kind.

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"In my opinion, the proposed permit will not result in meeting existing (or future) water quality standards for the affected streams," wrote Jim Harrison, the lead EPA analyst of the city's proposal in 1992.

"It is also my opinion that violations of proper effluent limits are likely. The apparent design of the CSO facilities allows, at times, discharge of untreated waste, and envisions only partial treatment of [feces] while not addressing other important [contaminants] affecting downstream water quality (dissolved oxygen, ammonia, phosphorus, heavy metals.)"

The city is undeterred.

"This is the solution to our problem," said George Barnes, the director of the city's bureau of pollution control. "These facilities will allow our city to meet and comply with current standards and regulations, and our permit.

"Unless there's changes in the water quality laws, the city will not need to do anything else about this problem."

A stronger or weaker law?

Changes are being considered.

The Clinton administration, scientists and environmental groups are among those who believe the Clean Water Act needs an overhaul, one that would help the nation finally accomplish what the original law intended.

Proponents want tools that would protect wetlands and curb non-point source pollution, such as the runoff from parking lots and streets, and the pesticides used on yards and farms.

The reauthorization of the Clean Water Act was supposed to come this summer. But the legislation has stalled, probably for the remainder of the year.

The momentum at the moment is not to strengthen but to weaken the law, which evolved out of a series of environmental mishaps, most notably an event 25 years ago this week, when Cleveland's Cuyahoga River caught fire.

When it became law, the Clean Water Act established three national goals or policies:

First, that there would be "zero discharge" of pollutants into the nation's navigable waters by 1985.

Second, that the nation's waters would be made "fishable and swimmable" by July 1, 1983.

Finally, that there would no more toxics allowed into rivers.

None of these has been met.

"One of the problems, I believe, and you see this in many particularly heavy urbanized areas, is that there is no respect for the river resources today," said Browner, the EPA administrator, in a recent interview.

"The rivers have become so degraded that people, well it's almost as if people don't take them seriously, and they've forgotten what these resources could be. They have no memory of them anymore, they've been degraded for so long."

Many local governments see the issue differently. They certainly want cleaner rivers, but there are limits to what they feel their taxpayers will support.

Sounding the mantra of "unfunded federal mandates," many city, state and municipal governments have joined with industry lobbyists against the administration and the EPA. They want the authority to decide for themselves when their waterways are clean.

Or at least clean enough.

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**GRAPHIC:** A teaser to this page G/01 story appeared on page A/01. Map: Chattahoochee River Basin, including Rottenwood Creek, Peachtree Creek, Proctor Creek and Utoy Creek. Key for Map (see glossary on facing page for definitions) CSO: Combined sewer outflow Black lines are the indicators of streams deemed "biological deserts" Blue lines are the indicator of "healthier streams" Chart: Who you can call -Upper Chattahoochee River Keeper, Citizen advocate for river; Sally Bethea. 816-9888. P.O. Box 7338, Atlanta, GA 30357 -EPA, Southeast Regional Office in Atlanta, 347-4727. 345 Coutrland St. Atlanta, GA 30365 -EPD, Georgia Environmental Protection Division, Water branch. 656-4708. Floyd Towers East Butler St. Atlanta, GA 30335 -EPD's Adopt-a-Stream program. 656-4988. -City of Atlanta. Bureau of Pollution Control. 33-6230. 55 Trinity Ave. Suite 5800 Atlanta, GA 30335 Chart: RIVER TERMS Watershed - The entire network of tributaries and rivers moving from headwaters to the sea. CSO - Combined Sewage Overflows are the points where many cities discharge combined raw sewage and storm water their systems cannot handle during rainstorms. Biological desert - Areas where few creatures can live due to pollution or other harsh conditions. Untreated sewage - Raw toilet wastes sent downstream without treatment. Fecal coliform - Bacteria which is used as an indicator to determine the presence of disease-ridden bacteria in sewage. In waters below Atlanta fecal coliform counts are routinely above safe state and federal standards. Situations - Sediments which wash down creeks and rivers when stream banks have been destroyed choke the life out of the water. In Atlanta, the law designed to prevent this is routinely violated and almost never enforced. Heavy metals - Lead, mercury, cadmium, chromium are a few of the dangerous metals which run downstream from metropolitan areas. Nonpoint source - The storm runoff which pours off every parking lot, street, and yard often contains dangerous pollution, such as oil, gas, heavy metals, pesticides. Chart: ABOUT THIS REPORT Troubled Waters was reported and written by Journal-Constitution environmental writer Scott Bronstein and photographed by staff photographer Louie Favorite. Staff artist John Amoss created the graphics for the report and also designed the projects, with art direction by Assistant Graphics Editor Paige Braddock. Database Editor Hal Strauss performed computer analysis of state enforcement activity in the Chattahoochee basin and also analyzed water-quality testing data from numerous projects along the nearly 400-miler Chattahoochee. Color photo: mug of Scott Bronstein Color photo: mug of Louie Favorite Color photo: Federal scientist Jerry Garrett taking a sample of Sope Creek./ LOUIE FAVORITE / Staff Color photo: Sally Bethea, a Chattahoochee 'Riverkeeper'./ LOUIE FAVORITE / Staff Color photo: The detritus of the city chokes the banks of the ironically named Clear Creek behind Ansley Mall./ LOUIE FAVORITE / Staff Color photo: The waters of Big Creek empty into the Chattahoochee at Roswell Road, south of Roswell, where intense development dumps tons of red earth into the creek./ LOUIE FAVORITE / Staff

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