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Filth Continues Flow Into Chesapeake

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WASHINGTON - A large and dirty problem continues to percolate underneath Maryland's towns and cities, unseen and out of mind, flowing into the Chesapeake Bay: aging sewer systems.

Between 2005 and the present, 1,953,313,709 gallons of sewage and rainwater have been dumped into the state's waterways -- that's roughly 100 flushes of an average toilet for every person who lives in Maryland, going straight into Maryland's rivers and streams.

"They were designed with the notion that they would overflow," said Jay Sakai, director of the Maryland Department of the Environment Water Management Administration. "It was an easier way to resolve the sanitary situation at the time."

Some of these "combined" sewer systems in the state, including a few in Allegany County, were designed to carry both rainwater and sewage and to overflow when it rained. Yet, many sewers designed only to carry sewage also overflow when it rains.

"There's just more people (now)," said Jim Foster, president of the Anacostia Watershed Society. "The sewers were built 50 years ago, 100 years ago and there's just more people."

The extra people and the age of the systems are forcing Maryland to struggle with expensive remediation, Sakai said.

In 2008, the combined systems in Allegany County led to 314 million gallons of overflow. This was more than three times as much overflow at Prince George's County, the next highest, with 101 million gallons -- despite the fact that Prince George's County has more than 11 times the population of Allegany County.

Mark Yoder, utility division chief in Allegany County, said many of the county's sewers were built in the 1960s.

"It was pretty common to use terra cotta, or clay, pipe," he said. "Both of those are notorious for having inflow and infiltration problems."

Allegany County has a full-time crew that fixes small sewer problems as they arise, but the system is just too old.

Robert Summers, acting chairman of the Bay Restoration Fund Advisory Committee, said all sewers have trouble with leaks and backups.

"There's 101 ways that a sewer system can get clogged and can cause a leak. That's pretty much a universal problem for all sewer systems. It's not just Maryland and it's not just Baltimore. It's a national problem," Summers said.

Sakai said many of Maryland's problems come from chronic underfunding in infrastructure.

"It's only been more recently that the problem with sanitary sewer overflows has started to be recognized and addressed. It is a problem that is not limited to Maryland," Sakai said.

To try to alleviate some of the problems, the Maryland General Assembly passed the Bay Restoration Act. The 2004 act added a \$30-per-year-per-house fee, commonly referred to as "the flush tax," meant to provide funding to

upgrade each of the 66 major facilities in the state, said Summers.

"In the interim," between the passage of the act and the present, he said, "costs have escalated."

The advisory committee has since been meeting frequently to try to solve the funding problem, Summers said.

Should there be more bonding? More cost allocated to the county? An increase in the fee? The options are many and complex, but so far, the fee seems to be helping.

Since the fee was put in place, overflows reported to the Maryland Department of the Environment have decreased rapidly.

In 2005, there were more than 500 million gallons of overflow. So far in 2009 there were 214 million gallons -- 2009 is on track to be less than half of 2005 overflows.

For now, the advisory committee is meeting more frequently than ever, looking for a solution to the funding problem as a tax increase in an election year is unlikely, Summers said.

"Every one of these (sewer upgrades) is a unique challenge and they take different periods of time," Summers said. "These are pipes ... that may have been laid decades ago."

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