



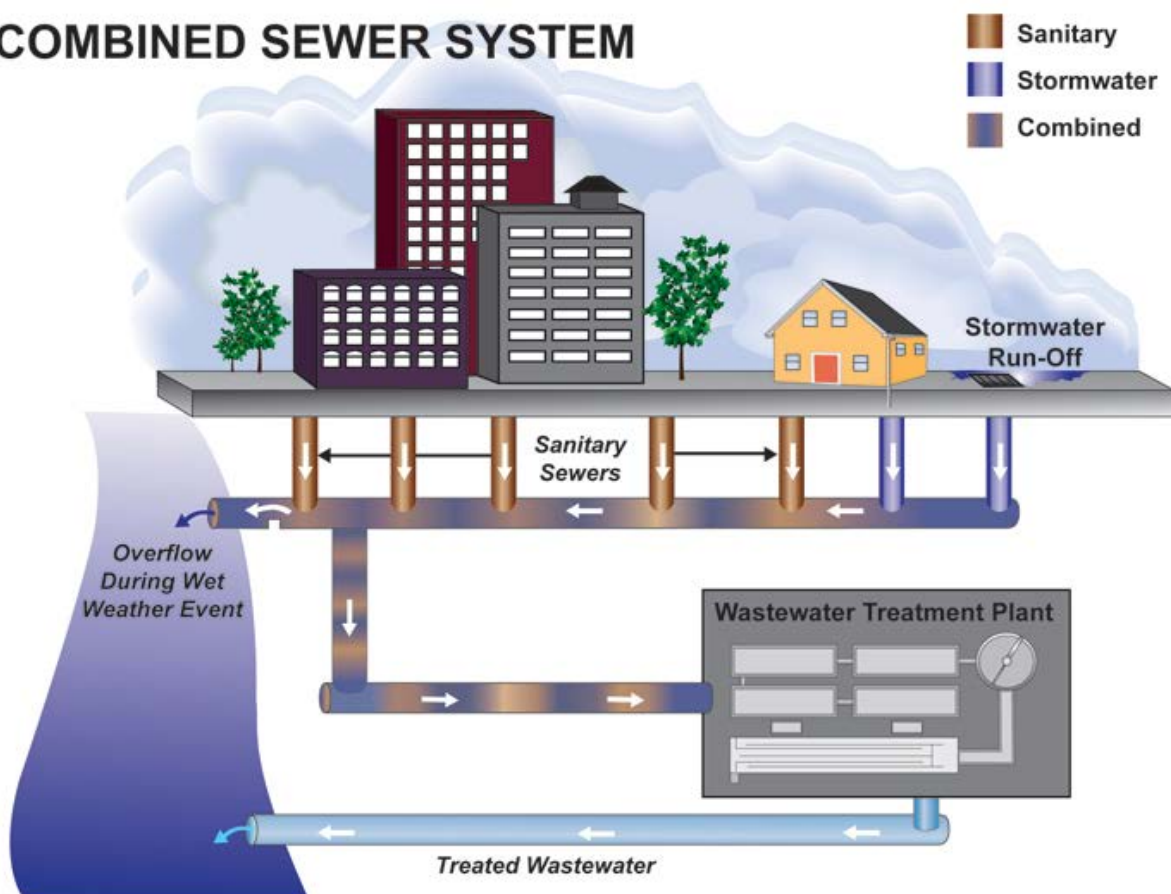
## Alexandria's Raw Sewage Problem: A Further Update

By Dean Amel

In the last two issues of this newsletter, I described the [problems caused by the combined sewer system](#) that serves about 500 acres of Alexandria and Alexandria's proposed Long Term Control Plan (LTCP) to address this serious issue.

As a brief recap, Alexandria's sewage system in some places combines storm and sanitary sewers and sends all of the combined flow to Alexandria's sewage treatment plant. After any substantial rain, the volume of storm runoff overwhelms the treatment plant, and raw or partially treated sewage is discharged into local waterways through four outfall pipes. In recent years, this has happened about 60 times per year. (See the image below for a visual explanation of combined sewer systems; image courtesy of the Buffalo Sewer Authority.)

### COMBINED SEWER SYSTEM



Alexandria's LTCP – required by court order – would largely solve about half of this problem. However, the plan would do almost nothing to prevent future discharges from the largest sewage outfall, which dumps human waste into Oronoco Bay, an embayment of the Potomac River near residences, city parks, and the T.C. Williams High School crew's boathouse. The result is water pollution levels many times EPA standards and at levels that pose serious health concerns to anyone exposed to the water. Virginia's Department of Environmental Quality has not required the city to take measures to stop this pollution.

In response to recent public pressure, the Alexandria City Council has recently voted to move forward a feasibility study for dealing with the Oronoco Bay pollution to the 2018-2023 permit cycle, 14 years earlier than was proposed originally in the LTCP. This is a positive step. However, the city has not committed to begin any construction to solve its Oronoco Bay pollution problems. Alexandria proposes a LTCP update in 2026, six years earlier than originally proposed, but no date is set for construction of the type of control structure that will be built to control the outfalls that expel the other half of Alexandria's raw sewage pollution.

Alexandria is in a difficult situation. Cleaning up antiquated sewer systems such as the one serving part of Old Town, is expensive and disruptive to citizens. However, the District of Columbia and other older cities with similarly outdated infrastructure are in the process of building underground storage areas or other projects to address similar problems.

Alexandria's representatives in Virginia's General Assembly and State Senate are working to secure state funding to help cover the cost of stopping this pollution. The state has in the past helped pay for the cost of eliminating this problem in other Virginia cities that had combined sewage systems, and it would be appropriate for the state to help Alexandria, since reducing pollution in the Potomac River will benefit many Virginians who do not live in Alexandria.

The important point on which we must maintain our focus is that this is a major pollution problem and threat to human health that is within the power of Alexandria's City Council to address. We ought not to have to wait until the 2030s to begin construction of a solution. Perhaps most disturbing is the argument made by some that Alexandria has been dumping raw sewage into the Potomac for decades, so there's no reason to rush to clean it up now. By this logic, we would not have undertaken any of the antipollution efforts of recent decades that have reduced exposure to lead, mercury, ozone, carbon dioxide and dozens of other pollutants that damage our ecosystem and health.

Many of Alexandria's political leaders have been champions on environmental issues from recycling to transit-oriented development. It's the role of the Sierra Club and its members to convince city leaders that it's in their interest to stop sending raw sewage into Oronoco Bay **sooner rather than later**. We know that some Alexandrians will oppose this effort because of its cost and short-term disruption, so we must make our voices heard in defense of clean water and public health.

Readers are encouraged to contact Alexandria's mayor and City Council and ask them to act now to clean up all discharges of human waste into the Potomac and its tributaries. Mayor Silberberg and the City Council can be reached [here](#).

Anyone interested in working on this issue is urged to [contact the author](#).

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