



Alexandria's Poop Problem: Promise of Progress

By Dean Amel

In the last three issues of this newsletter, I described the problems caused by the combined sewer system that serves about 500 acres of Alexandria, [Alexandria's proposed Long Term Control Plan \(LTCP\)](#) to address this serious issue, and the [Alexandria City Council's decision to accelerate plans](#) to deal with this pollution, in response to public pressure.

As a brief recap, Alexandria's sewage system combines storm and sanitary sewers from about 500 acres of the city 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.

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, resulting in 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 (VDEQ) has never required the city to address the pollution from this outfall, despite citizen requests. In response to public pressure, the Alexandria City Council 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.

The most notable – and most surprising – development in the last three months has been the interest of Virginia's General Assembly in this issue. Environmentalists are used to indifference or hostility from the General Assembly to most issues of interest to us, but the House of Delegates passed a bill requiring Alexandria to remediate its pollution problems by 2020 or face a cutoff of state funds. The State Senate amended this legislation to set a deadline of July 2025 for the cleanup, and that legislation is now on the governor's desk. The legislation did not provide any state funds to help pay for the work, even though the state has chipped in to help in similar situations in Richmond and Lynchburg. The Sierra Club has not taken a position on this legislation.

Remediating the pollution from Alexandria's combined sewer system won't be easy. As has been true in other cities facing the same issue, cleaning up Alexandria's antiquated sewer

system will be expensive and disruptive to citizens. It will be a major engineering project to build massive underground tanks that can store stormwater until the city's sewage treatment plant can handle it. It almost certainly would be impossible, from an engineering standpoint, to complete the project by the 2020 deadline set in the original legislation. Many have argued that the 2025 deadline is, if not impossible, certainly impractical.

The strong support for this legislation from Republicans in the General Assembly who usually oppose environmental legislation suggests that passage of these bills was motivated more by partisan animus toward largely Democratic Alexandria than by genuine concern for a clean Potomac River. It would be more helpful if the General Assembly were to direct VDEQ to do its job and faithfully enforce the Clean Water Act (and other statutes under its authority) throughout Virginia.

The Sierra Club supports setting a firm deadline for solving this major pollution problem and threat to human health. We support state financial aid for Alexandria as it addresses this problem, similar to the state aid that was given to Richmond and Lynchburg. We encourage Alexandria to determine a deadline for completion of its sewer project that is consistent with good planning and engineering practices. We would not support the elimination of any deadline for completion of this project from the legislation that Governor McAuliffe is now reviewing.

Anyone interested in working on this issue is urged to contact the author at damel@alum.mit.edu.

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