



## Alexandria's Big Dig

By Dean Amel

In the last four issues of this newsletter, I've 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, the Alexandria City Council's [decision to accelerate plans](#) to deal with this pollution, in response to public pressure, and the Virginia General Assembly's work on legislation to force Alexandria to fix its pollution problem by 2025.

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 proposed LTCP – required by court order – would have solved about half of this problem. However, the plan would have done 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 higher than 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. The city's LTCP was upended when conservative Republican members of Virginia's General Assembly, normally not friends of environmentalists, passed a bill requiring Alexandria to remediate its pollution problems by July 2025.

Since our last newsletter, the political fate of the General Assembly's bill has been resolved. At the request of Alexandria politicians, Governor McAuliffe amended the legislation to push back the deadline for cleaning up the pollution from 2025 to 2027. However, the General Assembly rejected this amendment, and the governor then signed the original legislation, putting the 2025 deadline into law. Some Alexandria city employees and political leaders have said that the 2025 deadline is impractical or even impossible to meet. Based on the experience of other cities, dealing with the problem will be an expensive and temporarily disruptive project. The city will have to build massive underground tanks that can store stormwater and sewage after any substantial rain. This mixture will then be sent to the city's sewage treatment plant at a rate that allows the plant to treat it before releasing the clean water into local waterways.

Alexandria has just held its first public hearing to discuss how it might meet the 2025 deadline. The Sierra Club will support the city's efforts to move expeditiously on developing and then implementing its plans. We also will support any efforts to get state financial aid for Alexandria as it addresses this

problem, similar to the state aid that was given to Richmond and Lynchburg when they addressed similar problems with combined sewer systems.

Anyone interested in working on this issue is urged to contact the author at [damel@alum.mit.edu](mailto:damel@alum.mit.edu).

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