

Memo / Correction:

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Headline:Sewer fix at crucial step  
Pollutant limits enters debate

Subhead:

Reporter:TY TAGAMI

Body Text: A plaintiff in the federal lawsuit that compelled Atlanta to overhaul its sewers wants more limits on the pollutants that would be flushed from the rebuilt system.

Sally Bethea asked at an environmental regulatory hearing this week that Georgia set limits on the amount of chlorine and four other pollutants the city can release from the sewer system it is building.

Bethea, executive director of the Upper Chattahoochee Riverkeeper, said the draft discharge permits were "not acceptable" because they lack such limits.

Until now, she has generally supported Mayor Shirley Franklin's controversial sewer plan, created in response to the Riverkeeper's lawsuit. Bethea's request of the state Environmental Protection Division comes as the regulatory agency weighs whether to issue permits that would allow Atlanta to use the combined sewer system, parts of which already are under construction.

Rob Hunter, Atlanta's Watershed Management Department commissioner, said no other public combined sewer system in the United States must meet the discharge limits Bethea is requesting, but he said the city is willing to negotiate standards.

Atlanta is enhancing an aging system of combined sewer and stormwater pipes. Sewage from them overflows into streams during heavy storms, bypassing treatment plants and emptying into the Chattahoochee and South rivers. When it rains hard enough, Atlantans are flushing feces into their rivers. The Chattahoochee is the major source of drinking water for metro Atlanta.

Bethea's group sued to stop the dumping of untreated sewage into rivers. The system the city is building in response will employ huge underground tunnels to collect the combined wastewater and hold it until it can be filtered and disinfected with chlorine. The system is expected to cost about a third of the more than \$3 billion the city is spending on sewer and drinking water upgrades.

A state environmental official said four of the five pollutants that Bethea complained about --- biological oxygen demand, total suspended solids, ammonia and phosphorous --- are less worrisome than chlorine.

"We have come to the conclusion that b.o.d., t.s.s, phosphorous and ammonia will not be problems --- will not cause water quality impact," said Jeffrey Larson, the manager of permitting, compliance and enforcement for the EPD's water protection branch.

Larson said evaluations indicate that chlorine has more of a "reasonable potential" to affect water quality, and he said the state can limit it in effluent. He said his agency will evaluate Bethea's request to limit all the pollutants after the public comment period ends Dec. 29.

The city has until March to begin improvements at the plant that discharges into the South River, and Larson said his agency hopes to issue a permit for it by mid-January. Atlanta has until September to begin construction on the much larger plant that will empty into the Chattahoochee, but the city already has begun construction on the tunnel that will feed it.

Bethea said she was "hopeful" an agreement could be reached with the city.

Caption:

Keywords: