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Sewer spills bring calls for action

Total closure of creeks, halt to system hookups are among suggestions

By Patrick Gannon
Staff Writer

The N.C. Coastal Federation and a UNCW professor urged officials Monday to take stronger steps to protect public health until Wilmington's sewer problems are addressed.

Meanwhile, more raw sewage spilled into Hewletts Creek on Sunday and Monday as crews tried to fix the latest leaky sewer pipe, which was discovered Saturday off Holly Tree Road. The professor called for the closing of two area creeks to all human contact until sewer repairs are made and the creeks are healthy.

The Coastal Federation, which is the largest nonprofit coastal conservation group in the state, is urging a moratorium on sewer hookups to the Northeast Interceptor, more frequent water testing in creeks adjacent to the interceptor and the creation of a citizens' advisory panel to monitor progress on sewer improvements.

The group also wants the city and the N.C. Division of Water Quality to enter into an agreement — known as a "special order by consent" — to establish a timetable for adequate repair or replacement of the Northeast Interceptor and other parts of the sewer system, with penalties if the city doesn't comply.

Ted Wilgis, Cape Fear Coastkeeper with the N.C. Coastal Federation, said an agreement would be a good faith commitment by the city to solving its sewer problems quickly.

A moratorium would help ensure that problems don't worsen before the Northeast Interceptor is replaced, he said. With spills already occurring, adding volume exacerbates the problem, he said.

The Northeast Interceptor — which carries wastewater from Wrightsville Beach, New Hanover County and parts of Wilmington to a treatment plant off River Road — is responsible for three large spills since July that sent an estimated 4 million gallons of untreated sewage into Hewletts Creek.

City Manager Sterling Cheatham said Monday the sewer problems are mainly the result of deteriorating pipes, not capacity, so he's not sure a moratorium makes sense.

Cheatham also said an agreement with the state to ensure timely sewer repairs wouldn't be necessary. The city is spending about \$1.5 million on assessments of the North-east Interceptor and the overall sewer system. Both assessments are just beginning. And the City Council already gave Cheatham a clear directive to make improvements recommended by the studies, he said.

"I don't know that I could feel any more bound than I am now," he said.



Brad Rosov (right), a technician with the UNCW Center for Marine Science Research, takes a sample Monday from Hewletts Creek where it passes under Pine Grove Drive. He and student Asher Williams were testing for effects of sewage spills.

"We want to improve the system, too."

Mayor Spence Broadhurst declined to comment on Wilgis' specific recommendations but said the city is taking a proactive approach to finding long-term solutions. "His solutions and input are welcome just as anyone else's are," the mayor said.

Ed Beck, supervisor of Water Quality's Wilmington office, said a special order by consent is one tool the division could use to ensure improvements are made. But Water Quality hasn't decided whether to seek one, he said. Currently, there is no legal agreement in place binding the city to improvements, Beck said.

Is it safe to swim?

Meanwhile, Larry Cahoon, a professor of biology and marine biology at the University of North Carolina Wilmington, said Hewletts Creek and Bradley Creek should be closed to all human contact until sewer issues in those areas are corrected.

"Plugging up holes after the fact, in

some cases months after the fact, does not protect public health," Cahoon said, referring to the spill discovered Saturday, which officials believe was leaking for weeks or months.

Testing done by the University of North Carolina Wilmington has indicated harmful bacteria from sewer spills remain in sediments on creek bottoms for long periods, he said. "As far as research goes, we've found what we need to know," Cahoon said.

Swimming and shellfishing advisories are in place for the creeks.

State environmental regulators can keep shellfishing waters closed or issue swimming advisories as long as tests show bacteria levels in the waters outside of safe parameters. But once waters are found to fall within safe thresholds, usually over several testing cycles, the added regulations are generally lifted.

To fully close a waterway to human contact requires action by the state health department, which usually would work

with county health officials to reach a consensus in such situations.

The N.C. Department of Health used this authority to close the Neuse River after an outbreak of *Pfisteria*, a fish-eating organism blamed for massive fish kills, in the mid-1990s.

David Rice, head of the New Hanover County Health Department, said health departments are granted broad powers to take action when the public's health and well-being is at stake.

But in the case of an action involving state waters, he said county officials would generally wait to take their cue from state health officials.

"We certainly would work in partnership with them on any issue like that," he said.

Rice added that his office was already monitoring the situation in Hewletts Creek prior to the most recent spill.

"The concerns are there," he said, alluding to last year's massive spills. "We've had some meetings on this already."

Gallons unknown

The latest spill, discovered Saturday, sent an undetermined amount of wastewater into Hewletts Creek from a hole in a Northeast Interceptor pipe off Warlick Drive.

Residents had complained of odors in that area for months, but exactly how long the pipe was leaking is unknown.

Crews plugged the hole during the weekend, but problems Sunday evening and Monday morning led to additional discharges into Hewletts Creek, city and state officials said.

Both times, the work area flooded and water spilled into the creek, while additional sewage had to be pumped into a swampy area that empties into the creek, officials said.

On Monday morning, the plug blew out, said Hugh Caldwell, city Public Utilities director.

Some sewage was redirected into a separate line parallel to the Northeast Interceptor, but that pipe reached its capacity and some wastewater was pumped directly into Hewletts Creek, he said.

The plug was replaced, and city officials hope it will hold until a cast-iron sleeve is placed over the failed section of pipe, likely today.

Water samples taken Sunday show little effect from the leak, city officials said. However, they expect samples taken Monday will indicate higher levels of harmful bacteria because of spills during the repair process.

Caldwell said the city might never know how many gallons of wastewater entered the creek from the spill off Warlick Drive. A report due this week to Water Quality might include an estimate.