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More sewage spills Backhoe punctures line during repair attempt

By Patrick Gannon
Staff Writer

For the third time in as many days, workers attempting to fix a cracked sewer pipe behind Warlick Estates encountered a setback and more raw sewage spilled into Hewletts Creek, city spokeswoman Malissa Talbert said Wednesday.

Two mishaps earlier this week sent water spewing out of the pipe, some of which made it into the creek.

This time, a contractor's backhoe working in the early morning hours accidentally punched a second hole into the 24-inch sewer main, sending more sewage pouring onto the site and into marsh areas that empty into the creek. Workers pumped some of the sewage back into the sewer system, Talbert said.

"We think most of it was collected," Talbert said. "Some did (escape)."

Results of water samples in the creek taken Monday show elevated levels of fecal coliform bacteria and ammonia. By Tuesday, the fecal coliform levels had decreased but they remained right at the state's safe standard for swimming in the creek, according to lab results from the University of North Carolina Wilmington.

Swimming and shellfishing advisories are in place for the entire creek, meaning residents shouldn't swim or harvest shellfish.

Mike Mallin, research professor at UNCW's Center for Marine Science, said even though the bacteria levels tend to decrease in the days after a spill, the contamination settles into sediments at the creek bottom and can return to the water column with any disruption.

City Public Utilities Director Hugh

Caldwell said Wednesday the city regrets the impact of the latest spill on the environment and the inconvenience to nearby residents.

"Our crews are working very hard in very difficult conditions and we will continue our efforts tonight to do the very best we can to get these repairs completed," he said.

Now, workers must put a cast-iron sleeve over the original crack, as well as the new one. Repair work was scheduled to resume late Wednesday. The first hole is plugged but the second continues to leak, Caldwell said. Most of the leaking sewage is being pumped back into the system, but "I don't anticipate that we're capturing every drop," he said.

On Saturday, city workers discovered a sewage spill after residents in that neighborhood had complained about odors for months. City officials said they

may never know how much sewage made it into Hewletts Creek from the spill because they don't know how long it was leaking or at what rate.

The city stressed the difficult conditions the workers are facing at the marshy site off Warlick Drive. Workers are trying to make repairs at night, when the wastewater flows are lowest, because they have to stop the flow to do the work. That gives them a finite amount of time for the repair before the wastewater flow must be resumed.

Another large sewer pipe is just several feet away from the pipe being worked on. And because the site is a marshland it is more difficult for heavy equipment and workers to operate, Talbert said.

"I don't think you could ask for a worse scenario other than being underwater," Talbert said.