

Star-News

STARNEWSONLINE.COM | WILMINGTON, N.C. | 50¢

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 1, 2006

Sewage spills leave element of unknown Some worry other leaks remain hidden

By Patrick Gannon
Staff Writer

Two recent sewer spills in Wilmington likely started long before they were discovered, causing residents to question the Public Utilities department's ability to quickly locate and repair leaking pipes.

It also raises a bigger question: How many sewer pipes are leaking harmful contaminants into area waterways without government knowledge?

Hugh Caldwell, city Public Utilities director, said the media have gotten the word out that the city has a problem with its sewers, so residents are reporting spills when they suspect them. He said he believes the sources of all sewage odor complaints have been found.

Meanwhile, results of UNCW and city tests on water taken from Hewletts Creek on Monday show high fecal coliform levels, likely from the Warlick Drive spill discovered Saturday.

City crews found sewage bubbling from the ground behind the Warlick Estates neighborhood, which borders Hewletts Creek. Residents had first complained of odors months earlier. The leak was caused by a hole in a pipe.

Doug Parsons, a research technician in the Center for Marine Science at the University of North Carolina Wilmington, said a water sample taken from the creek near Pine Grove Road showed fecal coliform levels 50 times the state standard for human contact. Fecal coliform is an indicator that points to the presence of fecal contamination in the water.

"It wouldn't be advisable to touch that water and then touch anything you care about," Parsons said.



STAFF PHOTO | MARK COURTNEY

Crews work at the site of a sewer leak at the end of Warlick Drive on Tuesday morning, three days after the leak was first discovered.

He said he had never seen levels that high in that location, except after sewage spills or large rain events, such as hurricanes. That suggests the cause was the Warlick Drive spill, which is just upstream from the test site, Parsons said.

The city planned to resume repairs on the Warlick Drive pipe at 1:30 a.m. today. Wastewater flowing through the pipe will be shut down while a repair sleeve is placed on the pipe as a permanent repair, according to a city news release.

No isolated incident

In mid-February, the city found a crack in an 8-inch residential pipe on Country Club Drive near the Wrightsville Avenue intersection. The sewer pipe was punctured by a gas line.

The water from the leak was flowing into a storm drain, which eventually flows into Burnt Mill Creek, city officials have said.

Wrightsville Avenue resident David McCall said he first noticed a murky, gray discoloration in Burnt

Mill Creek, which runs through his property, a couple of days before Christmas.

McCall watches the creek every day. On his visits he feeds the wildlife there.

"The day it changed, I knew it," he said.

Days later, he noticed the sewage smell, which kept getting worse.

He contacted county officials, who informed the city. But McCall waited and waited for the problem to be fixed. He eventually e-mailed a neighborhood watch network and neighbors started making calls, he said.

Caldwell said city crews began investigating odor complaints in Burnt Mill Creek immediately. They checked manholes, inspected pipes with cameras, inserted fluorescent dye into pipes to see where it came out and tested the water in Burnt Mill Creek but didn't find the source.

Caldwell said he visited McCall's property in early February, smelled

the sewage and told his crew to find out where it was coming from. The cause was found a couple of weeks later, with the help of the city's stormwater department.

McCall said he believes it took a neighbor's call to Mayor Spence Broadhurst to get the city staff to act. He said he's glad the problem was solved and feels sorry for residents in similar situations.

"It just shocks me that it took the mayor to micromanage the situation to get it taken care of," McCall said. "I'm not in the sewage business, and it didn't take me long to figure out it was sewage."

Caldwell said it likely was a coincidence that a call to the mayor came shortly before the problem was found.

"It's not like we weren't continuously trying to find it," Caldwell said. "It just took us a while to nail it down."

Seeking more help

Caldwell said he believes his staff does a good job responding to potential sewer problems with the resources available. But he said in the 2006-07 city budget, he will ask City Manager Sterling Cheatham for nine new employees and new equipment to help respond to and repair sewer problems.

"I think we can do a better job with more resources," Caldwell said.

Cheatham said Tuesday he hadn't seen the budget request. It will be considered along with requests from other departments, he said.

"It's way too premature to say" whether those positions will be created, Cheatham said. "We know where utility repairs are in terms of (City) Council's list of priorities."