



Below is a continuing discussion on the City of Ashland's plan for responding to the sewer overflow issue. First, a quick review: *Wastewater* is any water that has been affected by human use and generally comes from inside a residence or building. In Ashland, this water is sent through sanitary sewer pipes to a waste water treatment facility on the city's east side to be cleaned before being returned to the environment.

Storm water is water that comes from rain events or snow/ice melt. Water can soak into the soil, be held on the surface to evaporate, or runoff through storm sewer pipes directly into Lake Superior. Storm water runoff is meant to be kept out of the sanitary sewer pipe collection system.

What is a Sanitary Sewer Overflow (SSO)?

A sanitary sewer overflow (SSO) is a condition in which untreated sewage, including untreated water and storm runoff, is discharged from a sanitary sewer, or holding facility, into the environment before going through the entire treatment process at the treatment plant. SSOs happen when storm water, groundwater and/or snowmelt enter the sanitary sewer system pipes at a level that is higher than the existing treatment plant can handle.

What are the causes of SSO's?

1. **Aging pipes.** There are approximately 53.6 miles of sanitary sewer pipes in the city and more than half are over 100 years old. About 25.4 miles are made of vitrified clay, which are subject to breaking, cracking and holes made by tree roots. Other causes are loose sewer connections or undersized sewers.
2. **Downspouts, ground water sump pumps, and other drains improperly connected** to the sanitary sewer by homeowners, poor fitting manhole covers and cross connections between sanitary and wastewater pipes. Many of these improper connections occurred many years ago.
3. **Extreme rain and melt events.** There is no question that the last several years have seen drastic increases in the severity and amount of rain and snow we receive per storm. Our current collection system was designed using outdated 1960's standards of rainfall.
4. **Inefficiencies in the system** caused by improper disposal of materials into the wastewater collection system.

What is being done to solve the problem of sewer overflows?

As much as we all want this problem solved yesterday, this is not any easy fix. It will take time and it will take money. The entire network of sanitary and storm water pipes will need to be televised with a special camera to identify areas of the system needing repair. Even if we had all the money needed in hand today, we would still not be able to solve the problem this year.

The City is working closely with the Wisconsin DNR to follow through on a plan known as a CMOM Protocol that is approved by the State. In the past six months, the City has hired key qualified staff to manage the process of televising of the sanitary and wastewater pipes, and begin making necessary repairs, starting in the oldest districts of the City. This will begin in a few months during the dry season. Some problem areas are already identified. Repairs on these areas will be done this summer and be performed by city staff. Once additional specific areas in need of repair and remediation are pinpointed, engineering plans will be drawn up for each area and repairs will take as soon as possible thereafter, depending on what is found.

The City is actively preparing applications from a variety of funding sources to assist with the cost of repairs. These include USDA, Clean Water State Revolving Fund, CDBG, and Sustain our Great Lakes GRI funds. A detailed analysis of the Wastewater Utility Budget is expected to be performed later in the year to determine whether a rate increase to users of the system will be needed to help finance the cost of maintenance and repair of the system. Other sources of funding, including foundations, private grants, and green infrastructure funding through public/private partnerships are also being examined for suitability. Our state and federal representatives have been made aware of our needs in this area as well. The City is also actively partnering with community groups to help educate the public about ways that residents can help.

Where will repairs in the sewer system happen first?

The City of Ashland is divided into 13 metered sanitary water districts. From previous testing, we know that Meter Districts 7 and 8, located on the east side of Ashland extending from south of Lakeshore Drive to approximately the Fifth Street Corridor and from approximately 11th Avenue E. to Industrial Park Road, contains the most problematic areas of pipes. Efforts will be focused in these areas for utility workers to make repairs here first. At the same time, the City has contracted with a professional firm to survey, test and document problem areas in other meter districts to identify problem areas in these districts.

What can I as a resident do to help?

You can make a difference in helping the Ashland sewer system, not just today but throughout the rainy spring season. The vast majority of overflow events result following periods of heavy rain and thunderstorms or large rapid melt offs of snow. These severe weather events tax the sewage system. Such events call for action by residents to reduce the amount of water that goes down our drains before, during and after these rain storms.

Easy ways to help reduce the possibility of more untreated sewage being released into Lake Superior are: by **taking shorter showers, avoiding laundry, and delaying running your dishwasher before and during periods of heavy rain.** You can also **install rain barrels** under drain spouts and create “**rain gardens**” using vegetation that consumes higher amounts of rain. Another more basic way to help is to **never dispose of items into the toilet or drains other than biodegradable materials.** This includes “flushable” wipes which can cause clogs in the treatment system. You can also help by **sharing these tips** with your neighbors and friends.

Why can't the City of Ashland build a bigger holding basin to solve the problem of overflows?

The current retention basin located at the City's wastewater treatment plant holds 8.5 million gallons. Some residents have suggested constructing a larger holding basin near the existing treatment plant on the east side of Ashland as a temporary measure until the City secures necessary funding to repair all leakages to the system. While this sounds like a simple and quick fix, there is not enough space available at the existing plant to create a holding basin large enough to manage the volume of water flow we are experiencing at this time. Even if there was sufficient room, the cost of this construction would be well over a million dollars, would divert time and money from the cause of the problem and in the end would not fix the problem.

In community,

Mayor Deb Lewis

Reprinted by permission of Mayor Lewis, May 2019