

On heels of EPA order, state finishes plan to curb sewage spills

By SCOTT HARPER, The Virginian-Pilot

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Whenever it rains hard in Hampton Roads, raw sewage usually escapes from leaky old pipes and floods into streets, back yards and even living rooms.

Such overflows threaten human health and waterways with fecal bacteria and other contaminants. In the past five years, officials estimate that 24 million gallons have spilled into the local environment this way.

On Monday, after two years of negotiation and debate, the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality announced a draft plan to curb sewage overflows in 13 cities, towns and counties across Hampton Roads, including Chesapeake, Virginia Beach, Portsmouth and Suffolk.

It will be expensive and cumbersome, costing as much as \$100 million combined.

Norfolk and Hampton already are subject to similar repair plans, and both are spending millions of dollars to replace failing systems with new pipes, pumps and equipment.

Residents finance such improvements with higher sewer rates – and officials say customers in the 13 other localities can expect hikes soon, too.

In Chesapeake, rates already have gone up just to pay for the studies that will guide future upgrades.

“It’s a big, long-term commitment,” said Ted G. Henifin, executive director of the Hampton Roads Sanitation District, the agency which treats about 160 million gallons of sewage from 1.6 million customers each day.

The initiative is part of a national push to curb sewage spills during storm events and better protect water quality. Cities such as Baltimore, Pittsburgh, Los Angeles and Houston also are going through the process.

To oversee planning and construction locally, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency issued an order last Friday to the Hampton Roads Sanitation District that closely follows the state agreement released Monday.

The EPA schedule, however, is tighter. It includes shorter deadlines and more details. Some local officials, including Henifin, wonder why the EPA is intervening.

“We think we have a great solution for the region,” Henifin said, “and frankly, we can’t figure out what they (the EPA) are adding of value to the mix.”

Jon Capacasa, the EPA’s director of water protection programs in the mid-Atlantic region, said the federal government applauds the state plan but wants assurances that action will follow.

“This is a national priority, with significant stakes, and we need to be part of the solution,” Capacasa said. Since the federal order is a legal document, he said, failure to comply could result in penalties or fines. The proposed state agreement includes no penalties.

Henifin said the state plan calls on HRSD and local governments to complete their studies by 2009, finish computer modeling by 2011, and commence most construction and repair in 2013.

He estimated the all work should be done within 15 years and could easily cost more than \$100 million.

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