

Sewage spews into Annapolis' Spa Creek

Pipe leaks 300,000 gallons into waterway in what officials call a 'significant spill'



The city has posted a warning sign at Spa Creek in the area of the Spa Creek Conservancy and Chesapeake Children's Museum. Jeffrey F. Bill/Capital Gazette

BY REBECCA RITZEL

A sewer system leak dumped 300,000 gallons of sewage into the upper reaches of Spa Creek over the past week, Annapolis city officials said Tuesday.

The city attributes the source of the spill to a broken sewer pipe in the area of the Heritage Court town house community near Merryman Road, the city said.

Repair work began Friday and extended through the weekend. Residents also reported a blown manhole cover further downstream that sent sewage spewing into waters navigable by kayak, and close to busier boating areas.

The Maryland Department of the Environment and Anne Arundel County Department of Health oversaw the clean up, with the county opting to close waterways in the area.

“The amount of sewage is pretty extensive,” said Megan Pringle, a spokesperson for the county health department. She noted that any spill over 10,000 gallons is considered a “large” spill and triggers state and county notifications. “This is 300,000 gallons. This is a significant spill,” Pringle said.

Donna Jefferson, a board member for the Spa Creek Conservancy, said she feared something was wrong when she and her husband went to take their weekly water quality sample at the Chesapeake Children’s Museum Thursday morning and noticed a stench. Friday morning, that sample yielded the highest bacteria level recorded in the seven years that conservancy members have tested Spa Creek waters in partnership with the Environmental Center at Anne Arundel Community College. Tammy Domanski, a biology professor who leads the center, was so alarmed by her findings she immediately called the county’s Department of Public Works. Any reading of more than 100 colony forming units (cfus) of enterococci bacteria is considered potentially harmful. The reading at the Children’s Museum was 19,700 cfus.

“That’s evidence of sewage overflow,” Domanski said. “That’s very high and very local.”

She was relieved to learn that county and state workers were aware of the leak by the time she got her results Friday morning. And although she’s alarmed by the reading and the size of the spill, the good news is that the reading at the next closest testing site, between Spa Creek Marina and Amos Garrett Waterfront Park, was 276 cfus — still unhealthy but far lower, evidence that at least as of Thursday morning, the bacteria was naturally dissipating.

She urged all residents and visitors to avoid those areas of Spa Creek, noting that even limited contact can cause skin irritation, ear infections and gastrointestinal issues. And to not only avoid human contact with the water but keep pets out of the creek as well.

“Concentration that high can cause issues even with low levels of exposure,” Domanski said.

According to a timeline from the city’s Department of Public Works, crews were on-site working at “an active sewer overflow” near Merryman Lane by 11:30

a.m. Friday.

About a half-mile away, visitors to the Chesapeake Children's Museum on Silopanna Road spotted sewage gushing from a manhole cover Friday, said Ruben Davila, a manager at the 5-acre park and nature center on Silopanna Road near Truxtun Park. Museum employees then called the city.

By 5:30 p.m., city crews had identified the original leak site, and state inspectors requested that more lime be dumped on the ground near the leak to help absorb odors and wastewater.

Both repairs and setbacks continued all weekend. Friday evening, workers identified a crack in a sewer pipeline, according to the timeline. Some sewer lines run above ground and even above the water in the area, and city workers had to build a pipe bypass around the crack, according to the timeline.

But Saturday morning, the sewer line "reclogged," the city. Public works "checked the pump for the bypass on the sewer line at Heritage Court as well as the manholes downstream." All manholes were clear and the line flow was good, the timeline says. A full repair was complete by 4 p.m. Monday. That evening, public works evaluated daily sewage volume and upped its estimate of the leak to "in the range of 300,000 gallons."

Tuesday afternoon, Davila walked along the museum's trails and observed that although there'd been little rain in recent days, water levels in the creek remained the highest he's seen in four years.

"It smelled like a Port-a-Potty down here," Davila said, standing onshore about 100 yards downstream from the blown manhole cover. Just across the water, cabin cruisers and sailboats owned by residents of Spa Drive and Spa View Avenue bobbed in the creek.

The city initially advised residents to avoid the water in the area for 72 hours, but the county health department issued a "no contact" warning until Sept. 2. Signs were posted in the area by county health officials to avoid touching the brown, murky water. Any residents who come into contact with water in the area should "wash well with soap and warm water immediately," according to Tuesday's notice. Clothing should also be washed.

The Spa Creek Conservancy expects to release new test results Friday. Pringle said the county will not do its own testing because it doesn't have a baseline for water quality in the area.

Davila credited efforts by the city and Spa Creek Conservancy to stabilize the shoreline and plant native grasses along the shoreline with helping to naturally

mitigate the effects of the sewage leak. Water quality has improved during the four years he's worked at the museum, helping children identify red-eared sliders, great blue herons, bald eagles and other maritime fauna that make their homes on Spa Creek. Eventually, the museum would like to convert its sloping outdoor amphitheater into a miniature beach for kids.

But Davila now wonders whether those plans are compatible with the city's sewer system. He worries that the concrete patches on the manhole won't hold, or that the above-ground sewage pipes — which jogging midshipmen enjoy traversing like Simone Biles on a balance beam — are too fragile for the Spa Creek ecosystem.

“The water is definitely getting cleaner,” Davila said, “but all the little setbacks need to be addressed.”