A sewer relief structure on Falls Road, near the Baltimore Streetcar Museum. Millions of gallons of sewage mixed with water flowed from structures like these into Jones Falls in 2020. **MATT MCDONALD/CAPITAL NEWS SERVICE**

# Baltimore County Council OKs amended 2023 services map

**By Lia Russell**

The Baltimore County Council voted Thursday to accept the 2023 Basic Services Map, a technical map that designates where public utilities can be built, but amended it to designate a number of sewer pipes near Falls Road and West Joppa Road in Brooklandville as an area of deficiency, which could halt development in the area.

The amendment came after requests from an ad hoc group comprising members of the Green Towson Alliance, a neighborhood advocacy group, and other retired engineers, planners and architects, who contend the administration has ignored warning signs about the sewer system's inability to handle more wastewater generated by a growing population.

The group says it's pleaded for years with the Baltimore County Department of Public Works and Transportation to fix overflow issues with the Jones Falls sewer shed, which serves 67,000 county residents and carries waste via a sewer pipe underneath Lake Roland to Baltimore City and eventually to the Back River treatment plant in Dundalk.

Last month, the group asked the Baltimore County Council not to approve the map until it reflected the sewer shed as deficient, citing years of sewage overflows and a judge's agreement that the system was "woefully inadequate."

Baltimore County, which has been under a federal mandate since 2005 to upgrade its aging sewer infrastructure, said it's spent over $44 million improving that particular sewer shed and that the group is relying on old data for its assertions, which in turn the group said is true of the county.

"We've done multiple sewer rehabilitation projects and sewer lining projects to reduce inflow and infiltration when it rains, and it's actively being addressed," Baltimore County Deputy Public Works Director Lauren Buckler said.

Baltimore County Councilman Wade Kach, a Timonium Republican who represents the area, said he supported amending the map to curb building until improvements were made, despite pressure from Public Works and the county executive's administration, according to two people who attended a meeting last week among Kach, members of the Green Towson Alliance and land-use nonprofit Valleys Planning Council.

Kach's office confirmed the meeting and said via email "we [were] briefed by officials from both the administration and DPW" of their desire for the council to blanket approve the sewage services map.

County spokesperson Erica Palmisano said the administration "supports responsible land use and sustainable growth in Baltimore County."

"The county continues to support the 2023 Basic Services Maps as drafted, which are the result of expert analysis, considerable public input, and prior approval by the Baltimore County Planning Board," she said via email.

Developers plan to build 91 homes in the affected area, further stressing the sewer system, Kach said Thursday. The county also failed to ensure that the Johns Hopkins University made sewer repairs as a condition of being allowed to build its Green Spring Station campus, he said.

A Johns Hopkins spokesperson said in a statement that the hospital system submitted sewer improvement plans in 2017 and agreed to pay part of the county's costs for sewer improvements.

"We continue to be ready to make payment, even though the window on our obligation has closed. We will continue to collaborate with county officials."

Hopkins and Baltimore County are working together to obtain "all necessary permits and easements required to allow the county to construct the sewer project" which is "ongoing," county spokesperson Sean Naron said.

"Once all permits are acquired, the county, via DPWT, would then begin sewer improvement construction."

In March 2021, David Bayer, Baltimore County Department of Public Works' then-acting sewer design bureau chief, said the eight sewer pipes were inadequate to serve a nearby proposed 61-home Joppa Road development known as Greenspring Manor without causing a backup.

"'Zero' is the number of units that could be built without causing [the sewer to overflow]," he wrote in a memo obtained by The Baltimore Sun. "The Greenspring Manor development may not connect to public sewer ... until all sewer improvements are completed."

The County Council voted unanimously to amend and then approve the map, but Green Towson Alliance member Beth Miller said the area the council took issue with was only a minor part of the area she was alarmed about.

"Any constriction in a pipe goes upstream," Miller said. "If I had a clog in my basement, I wouldn't add in a master bathroom on top with a toilet and a soaking tub."

A 2012 report from civil engineering firm RK&K found that several Lake Roland-area pipes were severely overburdened, which was cited by a coalition of community groups that successfully campaigned to block a 150-unit apartment complex, known as the Bluestem development, in 2019.

More recently, a February 2022 report from the Ramboll Group found the majority of sewer interceptors within the sewer shed around Lake Roland showed structural issues and evidence that groundwater had seeped through them.

The county contracted with the engineering consultancy firm Hazen and Sawyer to build a model of and study its sewer system and predict how to prevent future sewer overflows. A report is expected in late 2023, Public Works spokesperson Lowell Melser said.

The Maryland Department of the Environment sent a letter April 18 to Walker and Council Chair Julian Jones Jr. "reminding" them of Baltimore County's obligation to provide triennial updates about its water and sewer plan, and that the county cannot issue building permits unless public utility systems are adequate to support proposed development.

"Baltimore County has been — and remains — in compliance with MDE and intends to meet all reporting requirements regarding the Triennial Review," Melser said via email.