Baltimore OKs more private labor to run wastewater plant amid staffing problems

By Christine Condon

Amid "long-term severe staffing shortages" at the Back River Wastewater Treatment Plant, Baltimore City officials approved more private contracting help Wednesday to run the plant's day-to-day operations.

The city's spending board approved a new five-year, $50 million contract requested by the Baltimore Department of Public Works for a company to handle "biosolids management" at the facility, which is the state's largest wastewater plant.

Under the contract, signed last year by the city, the company has taken over operating certain parts of the plant previously run by city staff, said interim Director of Public Works Richard Luna. The 40 city staff members in those areas have been transferred to other places in the facility.

The contract represents an expansion of private operation of the Back River facility, where corporations already have a sizable footprint. But city staffers were adamant during Wednesday's Board of Estimates meeting that it did not represent privatization of the plant, but rather a temporary fix to staffing struggles.

"It's not a privatization. This is really to help invest in ourselves," said Paul Sayan, acting head of the city's water and wastewater bureau. "It gives us time to recruit, to train and eventually take over full operation of the plant."

Staffing has been a persistent challenge at the city-run facility, which first came under state scrutiny in 2021 as it leaked pollution into Baltimore County's Back River.

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The following year, state environmental officials mandated that a team of workers from the Maryland Environmental Service step in to make improvements at the plant.

The city was sued by the state and a local environmental nonprofit over pollution issues at the plant and the city's other facility along the Patapsco. As a result, the city is now operating under a court-enforceable consent decree to improve both plants, and has to pay up to $4.75 million in fines.

Among the issues at the Back River facility was sewage sludge, also called "biosolids," clogging poorly maintained equipment, causing breakdowns that contaminated the plant's discharge into the river with bacteria and other damaging pollutants, dealing a blow to efforts to restore the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries.

The plant's discharges improved after the state's team stepped in, but that group has largely departed.

The new contract, which can be extended up to eight years for a maximum total of $100 million, brings in private, certified operators to work in the biosolids process. The contractor is Operations Management International Inc., a subsidiary of Jacobs Engineering.

The city has struggled with ensuring plant workers obtain certification. Fewer than half of the city's Back River staff have a permanent operator's license, a process that can take three to five years to complete, according to a statement from the department.

While Operations Management takes over biosolids, the city can hire, train and certify more staff, hopefully bolstered by a recent salary increase for water and wastewater positions, Luna said. The city also hired a permanent plant manager for Back River about two weeks ago, Luna said — a position that was challenging to fill.

The city has the option to back out of the staffing contract earlier than five years, though it would face penalties for doing so, ranging from $513,000 in the first year to $169,000 in the final three years.

The 466-acre Back River Wastewater Treatment Plant site in Dundalk. **JERRY JACKSON/STAFF**

Private companies already have a considerable presence at Back River. For instance, a company called ProStart manages the city's new half-billion-dollar Headworks facility, which came online in 2021 to address a sewage bottleneck leading into the plant. Another contract approved Wednesday by the city's Board of Estimates extends this arrangement through next January, according to board records, with the goal of training city staff to run the Headworks, heralded as a key part of the city's effort to reduce sewage overflows and backups into city homes and buildings.

In addition, a company called Synagro handles the drying of about 60% of the plant's sewage sludge after it's removed from the process, so that it can be used as agricultural fertilizer. This process came under scrutiny last March, when an explosion and fire damaged the Synagro building. An investigatory report referenced "poor housekeeping" in the building, and cited dust accumulation as a reason for the blast.

The incident, which didn't cause any reported injuries, highlighted the importance of the city checking up on its contractors to ensure they are complying with safety and environmental regulations, said Mary Grant, director of the Public Water for All campaign at Food and Water Watch.

"It's not a way to bypass accountability or responsibility, and it can also introduce a lot of new risks," she said of privatization.

Though it helps address staffing issues quickly, the decision to privatize certain processes at the plant also could increase costs for the city and ratepayers, since profit-making contractors may charge more than city employees would have been paid to complete the tasks, Grant said.

With several different private companies working in the plant, it's crucial that the different entities communicate effectively about goings-on at the plant, said Evan Isaacson, a senior attorney at the Chesapeake Legal Alliance, which has been involved in the litigation over Baltimore's wastewater plants.

"The main 'pro' is some of these firms have their name on the line," Isaacson said. "I hope they recognize that their name is on the line if the plant melts down again."