Pricey contractors helped rescue a Baltimore wastewater plant. You're paying the tab.

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2/12/2025 5:30 a.m. EST

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The Back River Wastewater Treatment Plant occupies a 466-acre site on the Back River in Dundalk. (Jerry Jackson/The Baltimore Banner)

Everywhere you turn, the cost of living is going up — grocery prices rising, gas and electric bills spiking and, as of this month, water and sewer bills jumping in Baltimore.

That increase — 11% for sewage and 3% for water — is due in part to private contractors the city was forced to hire at its wastewater treatment plant to comply with a state order to stop dumping sewage into area waterways.

A Baltimore Banner review found the city has spent tens of millions of dollars since 2022 on three different firms hired to bolster the city's workforce, and millions more have been committed.

Officials say it's a situation unlikely to be resolved anytime soon. Contractors need to remain for a minimum of five years, perhaps longer, Baltimore leaders have said, until enough city staff are in place to run Back River Wastewater Treatment Plant in Essex without help.

While environmental advocates credit private contractors with rescuing the Back

into an estuary of the Chesapeake Bay, they also warn that the city's solution may be fragile.

Alice Volpitta, the harbor waterkeeper for Blue Water Baltimore, said the city can't just pull contractors out of Back River without risking the plant falling back into disrepair and violating its permits again. But she's also worried about how long this situation can last.

"It is really expensive," she said. "And ultimately, it's better for Baltimore if we can have Baltimore City employees — people who live and work in the city — operating those plants."

Volpitta and Blue Water Baltimore first called attention to the pollution that Back River and the Patapsco Wastewater Treatment Plant at Wagner's Point were releasing into the bay in 2021. But, even as the environmental nonprofit reported problems to state regulators, Back River continued to go downhill, a decline public works officials attributed to supply chain costs and the toll COVID-19 took on its workforce.

State regulators tasked the Maryland Environmental Service with taking over the 114-year-old plant in March 2022. Damning reports warned of potential catastrophe and "failures at nearly every level" in Back River, including the depletion of half its operating staff. Remaining staff frequently worked multiple shifts, yet full coverage was "nearly impossible," one report said.

Since then, Maryland Environmental Service has left Back River, and Baltimore agreed to a $5 million fine and enter a consent decree requiring both plants to be repaired and operated properly.

The city also turned to private sector reinforcements to shore up Back River. According to a November consent decree report, the city has spent $154 million on repairs at Back River, plus another $88 million at Patapsco.

That report details $40 million that has gone towards bolstering staff across both plants. Professional Startup Services, or ProStart, supplies staffing for Back River's headworks, the first stage in the wastewater treatment process. Operations Management International, better known as Jacobs Engineering Group, is augmenting the plant's biosolids operation, a complex stage of treatment that's contributed to the pollution problems. Local outfit Hazen and Sawyer provides additional support.

Read more coverage of Baltimore's wastewater troubles:

- **Baltimore agrees to hefty fine, consent decree over wastewater treatment plants**
- **Baltimore turns to $50M contractor to help cover Back River staff shortages**
- **Why the city says work to restore a Northeast Baltimore stream went $14M over budget**

During a January meeting on water and sewer rate increases, city officials said they are paying $5 million annually to Jacobs, while ProStart is paid about $8 million each year. Hazen and Sawyer earns about $2 million annually, bringing the total annual cost to about $15 million.

Expenses have spiked, but city residents' wastewater rates had ticked up more modestly — until now. Sewer rate increases were set at 3.5% annually for the last three years, the lowest in the city since 1998.

This month, however, Baltimore implemented a 15% rate hike on sewage. Water and sewer rates are set to go up by 9% more in both of the next two years.

Grilled during the January meeting, city Public Works officials conceded that the staffing contracts were contributing to the rising costs driving the rate increases. But officials downplayed the total impact, arguing inflation and more expensive materials also were responsible.

“Paying contractors is more expensive,” interim Public Works Deputy Director Matt Garbark told the city’s spending board. ”That is not something we want to use for the long term."

City financial documents suggest growing contracting expenses make up the lion’s share of escalating costs. Baltimore’s wastewater fund, which operates independently from the rest of the city’s budget, spent $123 million on contractual services in fiscal year 2023, audited financial reports show — $51 million more than the previous year. Overall, expenses grew by $71 million over that period.

Revenue grew as well, but has not kept pace with mounting expenses.

City officials say contract staffers are needed to man the facility as Baltimore hires and trains its own staff. New employees need to be certified, which the city pays for, but the process is arduous, sometimes taking two to three years, Garbark said.

The city needs to hire and train 70 staff members to eliminate its need for contractor support, Michael Hallmen, deputy bureau head for wastewater, told The Banner.

may be fragile. (Jerry Jackson)

The erosion of the city's aging wastewater staff should not have come as a surprise, though the pandemic hastened the decline.

In fact, Chesapeake Legal Alliance Senior Attorney Evan Isaacson recalled a report he helped write for the Maryland General Assembly warning of what he called the "looming silver tsunami" of Baby Boomer retirements in the water and wastewater industries. That was in 2009.

The report estimated that about a third of all supervisors and a quarter of all operators in the U.S. water and wastewater industry were expected to retire by 2013. The disproportionately large share of Baby Boomers in the industry "will add to the already difficult situation of employing certified operators and superintendents at all facilities as required by Maryland law," it stated.

Instead, Isaacson, who participated in the city's wastewater consent decree negotiations, said a combination of retirements and penny pinching over the years left Baltimore with no choice when things hit the fan in 2022. Public Works was forced to bring in outside firms, which charged a premium for work once done by city staff.

These pricey contracts helped the Back River and Patapsco plants comply with their facilities likely benefited from an especially dry year last year.

They still racked up over $70,000 in penalties for minor violations, according to the November consent decree report. Isaacson warned that these infractions could foreshadow what happens if the plants come under pressure from heavier rains.

Baltimore has committed to a multiyear agreement with one staffing contractor, and another is likely on the way. A five-year, $50 million deal with Jacobs was approved in early 2024. With optional extensions, that contract could balloon to $100 million. A short-term $10.2 million deal was approved in January for staffing the headworks, and a new three-year contract will be bid this year, Hallmen said.

Council President Zeke Cohen, who abstained from voting on the rate increases last month, said he would like to see more urgency for efforts to grow city staff both in Public Works and across the city's workforce.

"I can understand the mayor and the administration needing to find some immediate solutions, but this cannot be the answer," Cohen said of contract staffing. "I don't want to look up four years from now and find us in the same situation."