Fresh Water, Foul Sewage

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Activist is happy to get a grant, but lingering “terrible odor” from Back River sewage plant leaves her wary

After Baltimore settles pollution lawsuits, Maryland officials report progress at the two treatment plants and announce community projects that are part of the consent decree

Above: The Back River Restoration Committee’s Desiree Greaver prepares for water sampling after dawn in 2022. (Mark Reutter)

Three years ago, Desiree Greaver was on Back River at the sewage plant effluent pipe showing a *Brew* reporter what you get when you push a stick into the water and bring it back up – brownish-orange foamy glop that “looks like poop and smells like a porta potty.”

Yesterday Greaver was near the same site with top state and local officials as they declared major progress on curbing pollution from the the region’s two wastewater treatment plants and touted $1.7 million in grants to 21 community organizations, including the Back River Restoration Committee.

“It’s pretty surreal, but we are very excited,” said Greaver, project manager for the group, which was awarded $655,363 to design and build a trash wheel to scoop up the garbage that washes up in the waterway.

“I know this was supposed to be a celebration and wasn’t supposed to focus on what’s not done but rather what has come from this that was

good," she reflected. "But what this came from was pretty bad."

Greaver was referring to the discovery in 2021 of tens of millions of gallons of partially treated human waste being illegally discharged by the Back River Wastewater Treatment Plant and Patapsco Wastewater Treatment Plant into waters that flow directly into Chesapeake Bay.

Blue Water Baltimore, along with the Chesapeake Legal Alliance and Maryland Department of the Environment (MDE), filed lawsuits against Baltimore City, which operates the plants.

Under the resulting consent decree, the city agreed to pay a fine of up to $4.7 million and make millions of dollars worth of repairs.

The agreement excuses Baltimore from $1.4 million of that penalty if it meets deadlines to make improvements in the plants. (An MDE spokesman says the city is on track to meet those requirements.)

Another provision of the settlement directs a portion of the city's penalty toward environmental projects with a focus on the Back River and the Patapsco watersheds, with the Chesapeake Bay Trust handling the distribution of the grants.

Back River Wastewater Treatment Plant in Baltimore County, the largest sewage treatment plant in Maryland. **BELOW:** An inoperable settling tank due to backed-up solids at the facility in 2022. (Maryland Department of the Environment)

Lingering Stench

Addressing dignitaries, community members and the media assembled at Cox's Point Park, MDE Secretary Serena McIlwain touted the improvements at the two treatment plants as "a remarkable environmental achievement."

Since 2022, according to McIlwain, nitrogen levels in the effluent from the Back River facility decreased 60% and dropped 78% from the Patapsco plant.

Greaver said she was glad to hear the plants are releasing less of this nutrient, which promotes the growth of algae and creation of oxygen-starved "dead zones" in the Bay.

But as a community activist whose organization has been sampling – and as a resident who has been personally smelling – Back River water for years, she's leery about cheering progress based on these limited findings.

"There's a lot of other things that were wrong that just were kind of overlooked today," said Greaver, noting that Back River bacteria levels, for instance, continue to spike periodically.

"And there is just still such a terrible odor around the plant when you drive by," she continued. "Sometimes it is like a gut punch. It's thick and heavy and just awful. It doesn't smell like poop, exactly. It just stinks."

The wafting odors have been occurring for months "at all hours of the day," she added.

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Baltimore County residents have long complained of bad smells coming from the plant, but it wasn't until four years ago that the nonprofit Blue Water Baltimore detected alarmingly high bacteria levels that led to the discovery of widespread problems.

Mechanical failures and inadequate staffing at both of the treatment plants were uncovered. Inspection reports showed equipment clogged with biosolids and settling tanks filled with growing vegetation.

Declaring Back River on the verge of "catastrophic failure," then-MDE Secretary Ben Grumbles brought in the Maryland Environmental Service (MES) to assume temporary control of the plant.

MES has since left, leaving a cadre of expensive consultants to perform critical services at the plant.

Acknowledging that both sewage plants "have faced some real challenges over the past years," McIlwain said they are currently in compliance with their permits.

Porta Potties and Plastic

The focus of the upbeat press gathering was on the environmental improvements said to come from the money spread around to community groups.

Recipients included Baltimore's Living Classrooms Foundation, awarded $222,539 to install greening practices to improve water in the Lancaster Street canal in Baltimore, and the veteran-led 6th Branch, awarded $154,263 for residents, students and community leaders to engage in interactive workshops to install pollinator gardens at three urban farms.

Other grantees will be planting trees, improving trails, installing rain gardens and permeable pavement to absorb stormwater and conducting water sampling.

Greaver said her group, which received the biggest grant, is looking forward to a trash wheel to mechanically gather up the floating trash that she and others in her group have for years scooped up manually from a floating trash boom.

What do these volunteer crews who work Monday through Friday, weather permitting, typically find?

"Oh gosh, we've found jacuzzis, couches, porta potties and just tons and tons of plastic," Greaver said. "And also trees."

Her group still needs to raise funds to operate the trash wheel. But once it is built and in use, she said, it will give the group a break from garbage collecting and allow it to focus more on its main goal of restoring Back River's water quality.

The organization plans this year to collect samples at 23 different locations both on Back River and and the tributaries that feed into it. And, wary of relaxing their vigilance, the group is going to continue watching the city's performance closely.

Greaver said she can't help bracing for more bad news after all the ways Baltimore DPW has disappointed the community.

"Are you sure [the plant] is really operating the way it should be? Or are you just telling us what we want to hear in hopes that we don't pursue it?"

Group members also have a fun task ahead: coming up with a name for their trash wheel as it joins Mr. Trash Wheel and three other googly-eyed anthropomorphic refuse interceptors operated in area waterways.

"What are we going to call it – that's the million dollar question," Greaver joked.

They will hold a contest and follow the will of the majority, but the longtime group leader confesses that she does have one personal preference.

"I'm not gonna lie. I'm going to push for a female name," she said. "As the only girl working at that boom for the last six years, that's what I'd like to see."

Grantees

Our Lady of Mount Carmel, Baltimore County – $7,729 *for the school to start a water testing and pollution monitoring program on Back River.*

Civic Works, Inc., Baltimore City – $52,786 *for litter cleanups in East Baltimore communities overburdened by dumping.*

The 6th Branch, Baltimore City – $154,263 *for residents, students, and community leaders to engage in interactive workshops to install pollinator gardens at three urban farms.*

NeighborSpace, Baltimore County – $9,149 *for community members to learn about native wildlife, plants, and trees and to host stream clean-ups to improve forest and stream health.*

Intersection of Change, Baltimore City – $51,667 *for the continuation of "Urban Youth in Agriculture," a workforce development program to engage youth in sustainable farming practices, at the Strength II Love farm in West Baltimore.*

Friends of the Patapsco Valley State Park, Carroll County – $30,000 *for improved trail stability along the Patapsco riverbank.*

Faith Presbyterian Church, Baltimore City – $6,275 *to plant trees and install rain barrels that expand the site's greening efforts.*

Living Classrooms Foundation, Baltimore City – $222,539 *to install greening practices that will improve water in the Lancaster Street canal.*

Lillie May Carroll Jackson Charter School, Baltimore City – $64,346 *to implement a rain garden and permeable pavement that treats stormwater and to create an outdoor education space.*

Gwynns Falls Community Association, Baltimore City – $8,740 *to develop two community-led planning efforts to transform the Lower Gwynns Falls Park and nearby vacant lots into thriving greenspaces for recreation.*

GeN'xt Ministries, Inc., Baltimore City – $158,435 *to implement several green stormwater practices at Huber Memorial Church.*

Howard County Conservancy, Baltimore City – $7,190 *to educate students on local climate change impacts and to develop an environmental action project based on what they learn.*

ONE More… ONE Less Mentoring, Baltimore City and County – $44,000 *to support environmental education through conservation-focused programs and explore strategies to manage the invasive Blue Catfish population.*

Blue Water Baltimore, Baltimore City – $37,361 *for water quality sampling and data reporting in the Herring Run watershed.*

Blue Water Baltimore, Baltimore City – $44,539 *for community-led water sampling, reporting, and engagement in restoration efforts.*

Back River Restoration Committee, Baltimore County – $655,363 *to design and build a trash wheel that will be installed on Back River.*

Butchers Hill Neighborhood Association, Baltimore City – $8,228 *for native planting events and a community composting program.*

Back River Neck Peninsula Community Association, Baltimore County – $40,700 *to plan for future restoration projects in Back River.*

Cylburn Arboretum Friends, Baltimore City – $8,118 *for restoration, maintenance, and education on the benefits of urban forest management.*

Friends of Herring Run Parks, Baltimore City – $50,296 *to improve community access to green spaces for outdoor recreation and to host clean-up efforts to support a healthier Herring Run watershed.*

Grow Home, Baltimore City – $48,276 *for greening, pollution reduction, and stormwater practices at Farring Baybrook Park.*

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