

Amid increased spending, DEP faces criticism on sewage treatment plans

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The City Department of Environmental Protection is committing more money to the ongoing problem of combined sewer overflow, but during a City Council hearing Wednesday, clean water advocates chided the agency for not going far enough and not being more inclusive.

Environmental activists hailing from the Bronx to Brooklyn filled the City Hall Chambers for a marathon hearing of the Council Committee on Environmental Protection to discuss the long-term control plans devised by the DEP to mitigate the impact of combined sewer overflows.

New York has an antiquated sewage infrastructure in which much of the city's sewage and storm water run through the same system. As a result, the system frequently overflows after rainfall, dumping billions of gallons of untreated sewage into waterways throughout the city each year.

While the city's water is cleaner than ever, fighting the combined sewage overflow remains one of DEP's thorniest tasks.

"Ultimately, we would like to achieve 100 percent reduction in combined sewer overflows," said Angela Licata, the Deputy Commissioner of Sustainability at the city DEP. "Having said that, this is a legacy system and we are now trying to build out over time what is a cost-effective way of remedying a problem. ... We are trying to develop plans that have a fair pace of investment."

The city was required, under a 2005 order, to come up with the long-term plans to clean up the sewage and eventually do away with the combined sewage system. Those plans include a variety of projects, such as the construction of two storage tunnels for Flushing Bay and Newtown Creek, and using chlorine to treat sewers near Alley Creek and Flushing Creek.

The state Department of Environmental Conservation has so far approved seven of the nine plans submitted by the city DEP to clean seven waterways: Flushing Bay, Flushing Creek and Alley Creek in Queens, the Bronx and Hutchinson Rivers in the Bronx, Gowanus Canal in Brooklyn and Westchester Creek, which is a tidal inlet in the East River.

Prior to the plans' approval, the city's DEP had committed to spending \$4.1 billion toward "green" and "grey" infrastructure projects to control combined sewage overflow, such as building rain gardens, green roofs, tunnels, and tanks that can capture or divert the runoff.

The agency is now preparing to spend an additional \$4.4 billion, for a total of \$8.5 billion, over the next 25 years, to fund the nine plans it has submitted, Licata said.

But environmental advocates have taken issue with the way the plans were approved by the DEC.

"There were public meetings but there were no public comment periods," said Lisa Bloodgood, the education coordinator for the Newtown Creek Alliance. "There was no opportunity to truly weigh in on the proposed plan, not through public comment or through our elected representative."

Licata said the approved plans cannot be changed, but pledged to get better community input going forward for ones that are still in the works, such as the long-term plan for Jamaica Bay. "We probably should have gotten that input before we submit a final plan so the public is not surprised," she said.

Environmental groups argue that the DEP's plans don't go far enough and there should be greater investment in green infrastructure to capture runoff. Many objected to the DEP's decision to use chlorine to treat sewers in Queens, which can be toxic to wildlife and does nothing to capture plastic and other debris.

"The plan to treat Flushing Creek's sewage overflow with chlorine is not a sound one," said Matt Malina, director of the group NYC H2O. "You can't treat a natural waterway like a swimming pool and expect wildlife to live in it and that presumably is the goal of cleaning up our waterways."

Council Member Peter Koo, who represents parts of Queens, said the administration must commit to capturing overflow.

"It's a really basic principle of urban planning that I feel is being ignored when it comes to addressing pollution in Flushing, Queens," he said.

Students from The Patrick F. Daly Magnet School of the Arts also testified at the hearing, calling on the city to design storm drains with smaller bars to block litter, and incentivize people to use reusable bags.

Council Member Donovan Richards advised the city DEP to gather community input on proposals before they are finalized going forward. He said he would be interested in seeing a

comprehensive study that looked at the cost of replacing the combined sewage system.

"If the mayor of the city of New York decides he wants to do something more and better, he is in control to do that," said Larry Levine, senior attorney of the Natural Resources Defense Council. "The city council has authorities to push the DEP and the mayor to do more, and that's why we're here today.