

Residential Advisory Council (RAC) Board Meeting Minutes: Q & A Section Monday, September 12, 2022 | 5:30 p.m. via Teams

Yolanda Winkler: We want take this opportunity to address any questions you may have regarding the water contamination last week.

Yosef Kebede: Yes.

Director Mitchell: Yes, I think we have some questions in the in the chat.

Yolanda Winkler: Ms. Freeman and Mr. Czeczulin

Lois Freeman: I heard someone say that there were three independent systems as far as the water is concerned. Knowing that E. coli is an organism that is found in the ground, how is it that the E. coli got into the drinking water system?

Yosef Kebede: The source tracking of the contamination is still ongoing. We are looking at different angles, different potential causes for the E. coli, but in general and just generally speaking, there are different ways that it could have gotten into the water line. One way is through a water main break. Particularly, if it's a large enough water main break where there is an opening and the line has been isolated. There are other reasons that are more localized based on where the sample is taken. Since some of these samples are taken from taps in different facilities. That tap may have an aerator that has a lot of biofilm and a lot of bacterial growth. When that sample is taken, bacteria may enter there also. As we continue investigating, based on our system and doing the modeling, we are hoping that we'll be able to be a little bit more conclusive on the source.

Lois Freeman: Ok, thank you so much.

Yolanda Winkler: I think John has a question and then we'll come back to Howard and then back to Broady.

John Czeczulin: Hey there I think you touched on it, but one of my questions is I believe one of the contributing factors to the Healthy Harbor initiative, not particularly, reaching its goals by 2020 is that when it rains, it tends to flood out the sewage plant. I don't know exactly which one, but it tends to spill into the Jones falls or something of that nature. Could you explain that situation a little more or clear up what happens when there's excessive rainwater and what it does to the Harbor's health?

Yosef Kebede: We call it, inside the fence, that means if there is an overflow, it's going to be within the system itself. It's not going to necessarily reach a body of water, but if there is an overflow out of a pumping station, that is a Sanitary Sewer Overflow (SSO) to a body of water. There can be that introduction, just like there could be introduction of sewage if there's a manhole that overflows and then enters the river without any treatment. The key

metrics that we look out for is the reduction of these type of SSO events and the reduction in the volume of SSO's. That's one of the things that we've tracked and have been very successful in managing. I'm happy to see that there has been a significant reduction in the volume and also the quantity or the number of SSO's, but anytime that does happen, of course you have that untreated introduction into the river that you know is not going to be good for a body water.

John Czeczulin: Gotcha. I do the Healthy Oyster Partnership presentation annually for Greater Baltimore and there were discussions around unusually high fecal concentrations around the Harbor whenever it rained.

Mohammed Rahman: Hmmm

John Czeczulin: I wasn't sure where that was coming from.

Mohammed: John, you may be referring to the SSO #67 and #72 that we have in Jones Falls, which are under the Consent Decree. Yes, those are the known SSO structures that we have in the Jones Falls.

Yosef Kebede: Yes, just for everybody's benefit, thank you, Mohammed. Utilizing the SSO structures based on the Consent Decree, we identified dozens of SSO structures and we were able to seal the vast majority of them.

Director Mitchell: Maybe for some folks this may be remedial in the sense, but some other folks just may say SSO structure and many people may not know what that means. Can we talk as if no one on this call knows what that means so it'll be a clear for the entire group?

Yosef Kebede: Sure.

Director Mitchell: That would be helpful.

Yosef Kebede: The SSO structures are designed into the sanitary sewer system. You can think of it like a pressure relief valve, if you will, whenever the sewer system pipes reach its capacity there is a sewage overflow. Instead of backing up into people's homes, these structures allowed for that sewage to just pass directly into a receiving body of water. So back when these systems were being built, the thought was dilution is the solution to a reduction in pollution, so it wasn't a big deal. But, as a city grows, it does become a big deal. One of the things that the Consent Decree required of us was to find these SSO structures and seal them.

The two that Mohammed mentioned are #67 and #72 just numbered based on when we found them. They are close to downtown and now that we have completed the Head Works project, we've seen a dramatic reduction in the volume of SSO's coming out of these two structures. But there's a little bit more work to do because over the years what has happened is that sediment, solids and debris has collected in that large pipe. We call it an interceptor because it is a large pipe.

Sediment, solids and debris collected into that interceptor accumulates and reduces the effective capacity of that large interceptor. Now, we're in the process of executing a cleaning project that's going to take out all the sediments, solids and debris. We've taken out close to 750 tons of solids out of this pipe so far. And, when it's all said and done, there's going to be even more.

John Czeczulin: Gotcha.

Yosef Kebede: There will be more reductions in the SSO coming out of those two structures.

John Czeczulin: Thanks so much for your answer.

Yosef Kebede: Sure.

Yolanda Winkler: I believe Howard had a question and then back to Broady.

Howard Hughes: My question to Director Mitchell is in regards to the recent scare with the E. coli, especially on my side of town, “Is my water filter fine?” I was trying to explain the difference between a carbon filter and the osmosis filter. I mean the osmosis way of purifying the water. Is there some type explanation on why the carbon filters will not take out bacteria and only take out the elemental impurities in the water?

Director Mitchell: I would say that's a great question. And, I think for us, as you can imagine through the boil water advisory that we had over the last week, it's really a # 1 priority that we educate our public and then begin to tell them ways that they can protect themselves, not just from E. coli but anything of that nature. We need to educate them on ways that they can better filter their water.

One of our follow up action items will be a hot wash of what we did around this event, what went right, what went wrong, what we can do better and then how we can better communicate with our public. It is going to be something that we're working on now. We've been discussing the broader picture, but I appreciate you sharing that and we definitely will make note of that as we go forward and begin to better communicate, educate and promote our water source and our water distribution system in the communities.

Howard Hughes: Thank you.

Director Mitchell: I think another elephant in the room, John, might have been when we were talking about wastewater. As you know, in March of 2022, we were hit with an order from the State for Back River Wastewater Treatment Plant. We've been working really hard on that as well. You may not know, but for four months, we have been in complete compliance. We are continuing to work on a long-term maintenance plan for the plant. A lot of these issues are because of the old infrastructure and the need for better maintenance. We will continue to be as transparent as possible. And so, the tough questions are where can we begin the dialogue and how do we improve because we need you and all our key stakeholders to partner with us. Our job is not to hide. Our job is to work with you as a team and work through the challenges that we need to improve. This forum is going to be where we together talk about the challenges so that we can make better decisions. We appreciate these questions. We want these questions. We want this interaction because I think that's how this Residential Advisory Council (RAC) will really support us being able to support you and all of Baltimore City residents. So just keep coming with the questions. We're going to try to answer the tough ones, but this is the dialogue that we need to move forward.

Yolanda Winkler: I think Mr. Broady and then Ms. Jessica have a question, I believe.

Dantwan Broady: My question was kind of answered but I guess you guys can allude to it again. My biggest thing is communication. We live in a city where we get information through all types of sources, but it's not always accurate. What can you guys do to give us good clean elementary information, you know, I mean, so we can all digest it in a simplistic kind of way?

Director Mitchell: Yes, one of the things that you noticed if you paid your water bill just recently, is a pop-up window that's asking you some questions: name, e-mail address, phone number, and do you want to opt in for the DPW newsletter. That started about 8 or 9 weeks ago? You probably noticed it and said, well, what? What was that? Why is it doing that?

Dantwan Broady: Absolutely.

Director Mitchell: Well, the reason why we're doing that is because we had about 25-30+ opt-ins. The idea is for us to give information consistently and as proactively and simplistically as possible so that you all can get information being conveyed. We also are revamping our entire website. As you know, our website is hard to search for information. We're doing a full revamping of that with the idea that we just don't want to shoot stuff out on social media because people don't see that. We also want to send emails, text messages out and do pop-ups in the community. We are going to be doing a lot more communication with the public more often. I. This group is going to be really helpful in identifying what we can do in those ways. So begin to think about that because you will start seeing a lot of pop-ups and different forms of communication in the Fall.

When we aren't able to reach all our customers, it erodes trust. We build it up by having constant communication and education around our systems so they know and you know folk have quality water. As somebody coming from the Bay Area, City water is excellent, but we have to make sure people trust us and know that. That's where we're going to have to make repairs and build relationships.

Dantwan Broady: Sounds good. Thank you, Sir.

Yolanda Winkler: Ms. Morgan

Jessica Morgan: Yes, I thank you. In the interest of time, I'll be very brief, but this past weekend we hosted over in the northwest side of Baltimore, District 6, a Community Resource event. One of the things we asked the attendees as they were coming in was what are your main issues and concerns? Overwhelmingly, a lot of the issues and concerns were centered around, housing and water billing. With the infrastructure being as dated as it is and with some of the issues surrounding increases in water bills and so on, how do we address that if we're dealing with aging infrastructure, the breakdown of it, replacing it and the accuracy of the billing? I know that's probably a more in-depth question in terms of how layered it may be, but that is what I am talking about when we talk about communication and how we can be transparent. The question is, how old are the bills and are they accurate given that the infrastructure is old?

Director Mitchell: Understood. For the last year, we have been working on the accuracy of water bills, making sure that people get charged for water consumption. Based upon their water usage and just looking at the costs coming to our call center, we see a lot less calls where customers are complaining about accuracy. However, we do get a lot of complaints around leaks

and my meter is broke.. We issued a press release a few weeks ago about our leak program and we can share this with RAC so that you all can share it too. It's a great program where residents, if they do get a high bill because of leaks, it can be adjusted so that they don't have an outrageous water bill.

Yolanda Winkler: And, I'm going to put it in the chat too, okay!

Director Mitchell: Yeah, you can put it in the chat, but if you could also send an e-mail that would be great because 90% of the water bills is either two things, a leak and/or someone that didn't pay a bill that is accruing and we have to deal with it. These are issues that we are working on. We've been getting a lot less calls on that just because of the work that we are doing with the adjustments that we're going to have to do due to infrastructure challenges which becomes a bigger question. There's been a lot of deferred maintenance, but our public cannot continue to receive 10% increases every year, we must create a balance. We must know what we have and what we can do and how we get the best return on our investment and be as strategic as possible. We were able to limit the increase in our rates to 3% this year, but we definitely want to limit it further by balancing long-term infrastructure needs, utility rates and deferred infrastructure. But I think that there's a balance we can do with our water bill. The better we collect revenue by making sure people pay their fair share and if they can't afford it, they go into our Water4-All and some other affordability programs, the better we can balance rates and keep capital projects going. But that's a balancing act that we're working on right now and it's not easy. Because we're dealing with some backlog, but we're working through it.

Ms. Freeman, I think you had your hand up.

Lois Freeman: Yes, I'm just wanting clarification, if you will please. I understand that we supply water to Baltimore County. Is there a variance in the rates that are charged to Baltimore County residents versus the City?

Director Mitchell: It's a variance in how we charge and that's why there's a discrepancy. When you look at the City bill, you see a water charge, you see a sewer charge, you see a storm charge and you see administrative fees and all those fees are related to all the things that we talked about previously.

That's includes the usage and the capital projects in Baltimore County. Baltimore County does not have all those charges. They get charged for water consumption and some fees. But all the other charges get charged through their property tax assessment. They are charged differently. But when you look at all the different mechanisms and what they are charged it balances out, they just pay them differently. The difference is how County residents pay through water billing and property assessment and City residents pay all water related cost on their water bill. It's quite confusing because you'll see somebody with a \$30 water bill versus the \$80 water bill and you say what's the difference? And it's because, sewer and storm fees are charged different and in different areas and the capital program is charged different. They are also charged on a quarterly basis instead of monthly. That's another significant change.

Lois Freeman: Okay. Thank you so much.

Director Mitchell: We can work through that. We definitely want this team to know a lot about that. In future meetings, if we want to dig a little deeper into that, we'll have that opportunity. I just want to tell you, we're going to be working as a team. We want to work through Baltimore City challenges and you know what, what better way to do it than with community. We're not going to try to hide anything. We're going to work together to share and work through them.

Yolanda Winkler: Awesome. Are there any other questions from anyone?

Dantwan Broady: With that said, this needs to be made public because the talk for years is Baltimore County's water is less than 2/3 the cost and we supply it.

Director Mitchell: We have a chart on how it all filters out that we can share because we hear it a lot. And, I think as we get our newsletters out, we may be able to dispel some of those rumors by putting that in there so folks know. I think that as we create our newsletter and know more and develop our strategy with the public, these are some of the things that we definitely can use as a topic.

Vinnie Ustach: I'm kind of cutting the line, but I just think that could it would be good for an FAQ page or something like that. Like why, hey, why do Baltimore City seem to pay twice as much for the same water that we're supplying?

Director Mitchell: Yes, absolutely. That makes a lot of sense. And, I think to your point we should have a nice picture that shows what that looks like that we always distribute.

Yolanda Winkler: Yeah, and it was on our webpage, but it has disappeared. But yeah, we do have a document that I can share with you that shows a clear distinction of Baltimore City versus Baltimore County water bills. As we revamp the website, that is the type of feedback, we need from you to ensure that we're capturing what the public really cares about, highlighting it and making it easily accessible on our website. That's what we're working on. I'll be happy to share if I find it after the meeting. Any other questions?

For the next meeting, we're going to deal with two topics, probably water billing and solid waste together and we may have time circle back to the City versus County billing to do it. And, if time allows at the next meeting, we may be able to talk about some of the programs that fall under Administration. We will send out an agenda as always. In addition to sharing the presentation that you all received today, we'll send that to you as well along with the minutes.

Howard Hughes: Yeah, I'm sorry for getting on again, but I did want to say thank you to Ms. Carmellita for helping me to get water to the seniors during the BWA. For those couple of days, I really do appreciate it because we did have a number of seniors in Union Square and in some other parts of the City that were not able to go and get the water. I am officially thanking her for enabling me to go get a whole palette of water, put it on my truck and pass it out to those seniors that needed it.

Yolanda Winkler: Thank you.

Director Mitchell: Absolutely. Thank you for doing that for the Community as well.

Yolanda Winkler: Anyone else have any comments, observations or questions? Dr. Griffin and then Ms. Morgan.

Rosalind Griffin: I was just going to add in terms of the education, there are a number of fairs and festivals that occur around the community, would it be possible once you get a resident friendly piece of communication that some of those flyers be distributed with some essential points that community people will be able to review.

Director Mitchell: Yes.

Rosalind Griffin: There is the internet, but there are a number of individuals who choose not to read newsletters and things of that nature. But if there's a one-pager with some good graphics on it, that might be helpful for people to understand this complicated process.

Yolanda Winkler: Absolutely. I'm the Chief of Community Engagement and I'll share with you that I have six liaisons and they average weekly participation in 25 community meetings/events and they do exactly what you are suggesting. That is share pertinent information that the public really cares about such as their water bills, trash collection, rate information and many other programs that will assist residents. So, if you know of those types of events and forums, please don't be shy about sharing it with us because, if there's room for us, we will be there. And if there isn't any room, we will still be there because we can walk around with the literature and hand it out. Dpw really is everywhere.

Jessica Morgan: You answered my question regarding the liaisons. We actually were going to have Mr. Green at our function, but due to his need at Harlem Park, he wasn't able to be there. But I wanted to know and you just hit it with the liaisons. You have six (6). Is there a way we can get that information of who's assigned to whom for future events so that we could reach out to them? Would we be reaching out to them directly for those events?

Yolanda Winkler: Yes, they are a great resource. They know just about how to get anything and everything in this city, not just DPW, but beyond DPW because we partner with our colleagues in transportation and housing. And so yes, absolutely, Camellita? I will make sure she gets that list to you in terms of their assignments, who is assigned to what locations.

Director Mitchell: I think Yolanda Winkler that there are 2 things that RAC would want, that is the list of liaisons and the leak adjustment press release.

Yolanda Winkler: Yes, Sir, I've got it covered. Feel free to share because I know in the communities you may be talking among yourselves. Your faith-based facilities may be talking about it and businesses as well. We also have a very well put together fact sheet on the "boil water advisory," what that meant, what you do afterwards and it pretty much walks you through all that we had to go through last week. Is there any other information that would be helpful to you?

Because these are the type of things that the Director can chime in on that we're going to be working through and having you all work through with us: how should we present things to the public? What is it that the public really wants to hear from us? What really matters to them? Are we sharing too much? Are we sharing too little? Is the communication too complicated that we're sharing? How do you, for lack of a better term, dummy it down so that we are reaching everybody through the means that we're seeking to reach them? We will do more pop-ups and in- person events.

There's a platform that we're not using that my daughter said is the big thing now Snapchat. I don't like Snapchat because it disappears. You can play little games and then you can't find it anymore. My girlfriend, who's around my age in her 50's years said that we need to use Tic Toc. It's quick and in it you have little videos and things like that is really catchy for those who are, you know, digital savvy. And, so those are things that we need to hear from you as well. What really will work in the environment where you all work.

Director Mitchell: Yes.

Yolanda Winkler: Play and live.

Director Mitchell: Thank you, Yolanda Winkler. I think what you will probably get out of our next meeting on our Administrative, Water Billing and Solid Waste will be valuable and then we're rolling up our sleeves and getting to work. I just want to give you all another overview because we want you to see the other side of our business and then we're going to roll up our sleeves and get to work. We are going to begin to think about what that looks like as we go forward because we have a lot of work to do. I do appreciate you all taking your time.

Hopefully, we have answered many of your questions. It looks like someone may have their hand up. I don't want to stop.

Yolanda Winkler: Vinnie Ustach

Vinnie Ustach: Thank you so much. I was wondering if there was going to be some way for us to all communicate.

Director Mitchell: Yes.

Vinnie Ustach: Asynchronously, like an e-mail list where you could just e-mail like DPW RAC app, baltimorecity.gov.

Yolanda Winkler: Are you thinking, Groupme or WhatsApp or something similar to that? I think WhatsApp is probably the best platform for something like that.

Vinnie Ustach: Sure.

Yolanda Winkler: Because you don't have to communicate to all as you may want to just communicate with one individual so we can set that up and call it the Baltimore City RAC or Baltimore City DPW RAC. We can do that.

Vinnie Ustach: Yeah, that would be fine.

Haydee Rodriguez: What about a Facebook group just for this purpose only?

Yolanda Winkler: A Facebook page?

Haydee Rodriguez: Group just for the group. Yeah, probably.

Yolanda Winkler: OK. All right, that's an option. Yeah, we can. We can definitely create those platforms for you to communicate with each other as well as to us if you are thinking of something and want to ask us a question.

Vinnie Ustach: Thank you.

Yolanda Winkler: Are there any other needs or suggestions you may have at this point? If not, I'm going to donate 9 minutes back to you all.

Director Mitchell: Thank you.

Yolanda Winkler: Director, do you have any closing remarks?

Director Mitchell: I just want to thank you all for sticking with us through this intense conversation and there was a lot of density, but the more we learn about what we do, the better you can help us solve it. And I believe that the only way we're going to solve all this is with community and so we're going to continue to work together. I appreciate you all taking your time out of your busy schedules to spend it with DPW and I'm looking forward to seeing you in a few more weeks.