

BasinBriefs



A Periodic Update of Wet Weather News and Progress throughout the Eastern, Northern and Southern Basins of Allegheny County

October 2006

Chief Executive Dan Onorato Encourages Regionalization of Sewer Collection System

While any top county official has a multitude of issues to address, Allegheny County Chief Executive Dan Onorato recognizes that rehabilitating and maintaining 4,000 miles of deteriorated sewer infrastructure throughout the county is a big priority.

"Future economic development is dependent on having a functioning sewer system," he told 250 municipal leaders, managers and public works professionals during his keynote address at the eighth annual 3 Rivers Wet Weather (3RWW) Sewer Conference on September 27.

He urged municipalities to work together to address this multi-billion dollar problem by complying with the EPA municipal consent orders to resolve sewage overflows that pollute our waterways every time it rains. He noted that the County has invested \$1.1 billion on infrastructure development at old steel mill sites, a warehouse development near Pittsburgh International Airport and numerous other riverfront areas.

"These sites will be unusable if there isn't capacity to handle sewage," Mr. Onorato emphasized, "so it's collectively important to get this done."

It's not cost-effective to have 83 municipalities manage one sewer collection system, he continued, citing the County-wide consolidation of the

911 emergency response system, which saved municipalities hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Regional approaches coordinated by 3RWW under the municipal consent orders have already provided huge fiscal savings for municipalities:

- A system-wide GPS mapping of 80,000 manholes throughout the system resulted in a savings of \$11 million.
- A regional flow monitoring plan developed through 3RWW will save municipalities up to \$15 million.

Mr. Onorato committed to seeking funding by lobbying state and federal leaders, but only if municipalities work together on a

long-term solution. "I can't argue for big money if we don't have a plan to do this," Mr. Onorato said.

He advocated for consolidation of the sewer collection system under one regional entity—either ALCOSAN or a new entity—which would not only allow financing over a longer period of time, but would provide a more effective strategy for implementing a long-term wet weather control plan.

Mr. Onorato acknowledged the work that has been done, but noted that some of the County's municipalities will need help. "We have 25 communities that are fiscally distressed," he said. We have to help those municipalities with assessing and solving the issue.

Solving the largest public works problem ever faced by this region will require cooperation and leadership. In his keynote address, Mr. Onorato committed to providing the necessary leadership if the municipalities continue to work together on regional compliance and a long-term plan for regionalization.

Recent News Coverage on the Wet Weather Issue and the Need for Regionalization

- September 24, 2006
Pittsburgh Tribune Review
Wet Weather Woes
By Allison Heinrichs
www.pittsburghlive.com/x/pittsburghtrib/search/s_471957.html
- September 28, 2006
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette
Onorato: Team effort needed on sewers
By Don Hopey
www.post-gazette.com/pg/06271/725699-85.stm
- October 1, 2006
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette
Editorial Page
For full content of the editorial, see Page 2 of this issue of *BasinBriefs*

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Editorial published in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, October 1, 2006:

"Onorato leads on a major infrastructure problem"

Rain fell in Pittsburgh last week and while that may be good news for gardeners, rainfall poses a problem for the city and region. While it is nasty to contemplate and nastier to encounter, when it rains around here—even a small amount—sewer systems often overflow into the rivers.

So on Thursday, the black and orange flags went up again along Allegheny County's rivers, indicating a combined sewer overflow day and our collective shame. It was the 10th alert of the recreational boating season.

This is a perennial occurrence. But unless you are out on the water, you might not know. The subject is not sexy, and it is not even polite. Worse, the solution is very expensive, a perfect storm of factors for those inclined to do nothing.

Yet the alarm has been sounded in numerous ways. A study released last year by the National Academy of Sciences—sponsored by the Allegheny Conference on Community Development—faulted 11 counties in southwestern Pennsylvania for having too many small, autonomous municipal treatment systems.

In 2002, a report called "Investing in Clean Water" by a committee of 60 business, government and civic leaders and the Pennsylvania Economy League outlined the problems that flow—literally—from the failure of the patchwork of municipal governments to keep the water clean. That same year, the *Post-Gazette* published a special series that revealed a grim litany of facts concerning water and sewer lines.

Even as the rains fell Thursday, a group of municipal leaders, managers and public works employees were in Cranberry discussing just these issues at the eighth annual 3 Rivers Wet Weather

Sewer Conference. The previous day some 250 of them had heard Allegheny County Chief Executive Dan Onorato call for a cooperative effort to tackle the problem, offering to spearhead the effort, including lobbying for state and federal funds if the municipalities get their act together. Amen to that.

Keeping the water clean has to be done, not only because it's important to safeguarding public health—and indeed economic development, as Mr. Onorato pointed out—but because it is required by federal law. (ALCOSAN is currently negotiating with the Environmental Protection Agency on a consent decree to fix wet weather problems.) The cost may be huge and the challenges great, but there is no choice.

Mr. Onorato gets it—and we can only hope that other officials in the area get it too.