OPINION & COMMENTARY

PATTY GAMBARINI, LIZ BATISTA, MICHAEL GALLAGHER & JOSH SCHIMMEL | *GUEST VIEWPOINT*

Public needs to see bigger picture on sewer overflows

RECENT NEWS COVerage of combined sewer overflows has brought renewed attention to water quality in the Connecticut River. The current discussion does not always capture the full story: how far our region has come, how dramatically public use of the river has grown and how much work remains.

Combined sewer overflows, or CSOs, occur when heavy rainfall enters older sewer systems where stormwater and sanitary sewage are carried through the same pipes. When the volume exceeds the system's capacity, the excess flow is released through permitted outfalls to prevent sewage from backing up into homes, businesses and streets. As we face more extreme weather, managing these systems has become increasingly difficult.

This is a serious challenge, but it is not a new one. Combined sewer systems were built more than a century ago. Massachusetts communities along the Connecticut River have been working for more than 30 years to reduce their impacts.

The Connecticut River Cleanup Committee was formed in 1993 through a regional partnership involving the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission, the Springfield Water and Sewer Commission, the city of Chicopee, the city of Holyoke and communities throughout the watershed. Since then, we have worked with cities and towns to secure funding and advance projects that have produced substantial, measurable improvements.

A sign warning the public about potential sewage discharge from combined sewer overflows at a site on the Connecticut River in Springfield. "The estimated cost of reducing the remaining 49 CSOs in the region is approximately $617 million in today's dollars (complete elimination would cost billions)," the authors write. "Those estimates will continue to rise as construction, labor, materials and financing costs increase. A project that may have cost $3 million or $4 million two decades ago could easily cost $20 million today." (THE REPUBLICAN / FILE PHOTO)

Four communities have eliminated their combined sewer systems entirely. The three largest communities with remaining systems — Chicopee, Holyoke and Springfield — continue to make progress despite limited resources and many competing infrastructure needs.

Since this regional effort began:

- 85 CSO outfalls have been eliminated, a reduction of 63.4%.
- Annual CSO discharge volume has been reduced by 73.8%.

These accomplishments represent hundreds of millions of dollars in investment, decades of planning and construction, and a sustained commitment by local ratepayers, municipal leaders, utilities, state and federal agencies and elected officials.

The results can also be seen in how people experience the Connecticut River today.

When these cleanup programs began, public access to and recreational use of the river were far more limited. Today, many more people fish, paddle, row, boat, walk along the riverfront, participate in community events and otherwise enjoy the river and its tributaries. Riverfront parks, trails, boating facilities, rowing programs and other recreational investments have helped reconnect residents with a resource too often viewed through its industrial past.

That increased use is evidence of progress. It is also one reason CSO notifications receive greater attention today: more people are connected to the river, care about its condition and expect continued improvement.

Despite the progress, much more remains to be done. The roadmap for coming work is described in the EPA-approved Long Term Control Plans for each community. The estimated cost of reducing the remaining 49 CSOs in the region is approximately $617 million in today's dollars (complete elimination would cost billions). Those estimates will continue to rise as construction, labor, materials and financing costs increase. A project that may have cost $3 million or $4 million two decades ago could easily cost $20 million today.

At the same time, Chicopee, Holyoke and Springfield must maintain water, sewer, pumping and stormwater systems while meeting expanding regulatory requirements. As some of the commonwealth's most economically challenged communities, they cannot fund projects of this scale through local rates alone without creating serious affordability concerns for residents and businesses.

The benefits of these investments extend well beyond municipal boundaries. These three cities are the economic, cultural and educational centers of the region. Approximately 70,000 people from surrounding cities and towns commute to employers in these three communities. Visitors and residents from across the Pioneer Valley also use the Connecticut River and benefit from its improved water quality.

The river is regional. The environmental and economic benefits of cleaner water are regional. The solution must therefore be regional as well.

A coordinated regional strategy, supported by stable long-term funding, will allow communities to plan projects efficiently, control costs, protect ratepayer affordability and direct resources toward the improvements that will produce the greatest water-quality benefits.

The Connecticut River is cleaner, more accessible and more widely used than it was when this work began in 1993. That is a success worth recognizing. It is also a foundation on which we must continue to build, because the next phase of progress will require the same persistence that brought us this far.

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