

St. Petersburg, Florida: Millions of gallons of untreated sewage pumped into bayou

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An investigation published August 4 by WTSP 10 News in the Tampa Bay, Florida area exposed that the City of St. Petersburg had been pumping millions of gallons of raw, untreated sewage into a bayou near a low-income residential area. Another article published August 10 showed that the city had then begun pumping copious amounts of the same sewage into Tampa Bay. This was purportedly due to massive storms that brought an overwhelming amount of storm water into their facilities. This explanation, however, intentionally obfuscates the mismanagement of resources that really led to these events.

City officials have evaded calls that they answer for their actions and have sought to downplay the extent to which their policies have exposed their citizens to dangerous health risks and damaged their ecosystems. However, a small number of employees and their representatives, who wished to remain anonymous, spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* in order to shed light onto what has really been happening behind the scenes.

The story actually begins earlier in the summer, when the City of St. Petersburg shuttered one of its four wastewater facilities for dubious reasons. “No one can nail [the reason] down,” said one of the sources, “but of course that plant sits on prime real estate downtown that developers have wanted for years.” This view was supported by another source who pointed out that, since the facility is located next to an airport, there was some interest in using the land for hangars, but that Mike Connors, St. Petersburg’s public works administrator, has already rejected this proposal. Connors told local reporters that the land is too valuable for such uses; in other words, they want to make the biggest profit possible off giving up needed infrastructure.

Another informant explained that all four of the

plants need a massive overhauling. “The southwest plant hasn’t had any work done since it was first installed in 1972.” He suggested that part of the reasoning behind closing the downtown plant was an attempt “to save money and consolidate treatment operations.”

St. Petersburg has seen massive growth in recent years, especially in its downtown area where multitudes of high-priced condominiums and accompanying overpriced shopping centers have sprung up. This means that there has been more and more raw sewage coming into the plant that needs to be treated. The closing of the downtown plant therefore meant that the southwest plant, located near Clam Bayou, where 14 million gallons of raw sewage was to be pumped early in August, would have to handle ever-increasing amounts of excess contaminated water.

One source told the WSWs that the facility can handle up to 40 million gallons a day (MGD) of raw sewage and that before the recent major storm the facility was only processing about 15 MGD even with the diversion of sewage from the downtown area. However, when a major storm came through the area, something that is a regular occurrence in this part of Florida, the plant began to overflow with approximately 55-65 MGD coming through its gates. Employees were forced to place sandbags around the facility in order to keep the contaminated water from seeping out into the nearby neighborhoods.

City officials knew this would happen, but went through with their shuttering of the downtown plant anyway. “Every car in [the southwest plant] parking lot belongs to a worker who warned them that this would happen,” the source explained. “We’ve been saying this for the last three years that they’ve been trying to put this through.” He elaborated that he and other

workers were told to go along with the plans or else “get left behind.” It is damning that this debacle has occurred less than two months after the shuttering of the downtown plant.

Once the southwest facility began to be overloaded with sewage, employees were “ordered by management to SHUT DOWN the main lift station and ONLY treat flow from downtown.” Management then “popped a man hole, dropped in hoses, and pumped the large diesel pumps right into [Clam] bayou.” It is notable that much of the housing around this bayou has historically been home to lower-income African-American families. Some critics of the city are thereby claiming that this incident is an example of institutionalized racism. One informant explained that this was planned by management and that he was told “better there than downtown.”

“On one side of the bayou you have a yacht club and a park,” one source explained, “but on the other are these black neighborhoods, so all of this run-off is falling into streams that run into their community.” When the WSWS visited the area around the bayou, it found a plethora of signs posted that warned residents not to allow their children to play or walk their dogs near the contaminated surface water. A walk through the park on the west side of the bayou is currently accompanied by the thick smell of feces, and a once beautiful estuary is now coated by a layer of fetid sewage.

According to one of our sources, at some point Mayor Rick Kriseman, who is now justifying his actions by claiming that surrounding cities have done worse, declared that he did not want “one more drop to be pumped into that bayou.” Instead, workers were sent to the shuttered downtown facility in order to allow some of the sewage to flow into the holding tanks. After they were filled, administrators ordered their workers to pump at least 2 million gallons of raw sewage straight out into Tampa Bay. An informant explained that “the wet well [at the southwest plant] was rising” and that the sewage “would have spilled out downtown somewhere if they did nothing.”

In other words, they only reutilized the downtown plant once the higher-income areas were in danger of being flooded by feces and rancid storm water.

Little of this information has been reported by the news media, and city officials are working their hardest

to displace any responsibility for what has happened. At a city council meeting on Thursday, water resources director Steve Leavitt actually claimed that the rains that caused this mess were part of a historic weather event. “We can’t sign an agreement with Mother Nature,” Leavitt said. “There is no way we can guarantee this event won’t happen again.”

This logic is spurious. Leavitt could reopen the downtown plant to full capacity, and even if this was not enough to handle his “historic weather events” the city could easily justify the building of new facilities and the hiring of a larger workforce due to its leaping economic growth. The downtown plant can easily handle 25 MGD, according to a source, and along with the 40 MGD at the Southwest plant this could have contained the storm. He explained that, had the downtown plant still been in operation, the only way this incident would have happened would have been in the event of mechanical failure.

This exposes Leavitt, Kriseman, and the rest of the corporatist city leaders for what they really are: capitalist apologists who intentionally place corporate profits above the health and welfare of the masses of people living in their care.

Meanwhile, the storm season that batters the central gulf coast of Florida for several months each year is far from over. The danger of another incident like this has the potential to occur several more times before this year is finished. The evasion by city officials of any responsibility means that the pumping of raw sewage into public places—placing the health of St. Petersburg’s citizens at risk—will continue.



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