

City sewers improving

Port Huron still ranks high in state survey

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Since 1998, Port Huron has spent at least \$135 million separating its combined sewers in what City Engineer Bob Clegg calls "the largest public infrastructure project the city of Port Huron has ever undertaken."

Yet, as it has for the past 150 years, whenever it rains, the city still releases millions of gallons of combined storm water and human and industrial waste into the St. Clair River. And the city likely will not eliminate all of its combined sewers until 2016.

In 2007, the last year for which figures are available from the state Department of **Environmental** Quality, there were seven combined sewer overflows in Port Huron, releasing a total of 30.6 million gallons of storm water and untreated sewage.

That's enough volume to fill more than 38 swimming pools the size of the Water Cube used during the recent Summer Olympics in Beijing.

Port Huron in 2007 ranked in the top five in volume of combined sewer overflows, trailing Detroit, Dearborn, Lansing and Southgate/Wyandotte, and accounting for about 2.3% of the 13.575 billion gallons of untreated storm water and sewage released that year.

While Port Huron's number is large, 30.6 million gallons actually represents significant progress from the situation in 1998 when the DEQ ordered Port Huron to separate its sewers, Clegg said.

Before the city began separating its combined sewers into storm and sanitary sewers, Port Huron was releasing an average of 309 million gallons of untreated sewage and storm water into the river annually, he said. At the end of this construction year, Clegg said, the goal is to have reduced that average to about 38 million gallons.

"The 38 million gallons would be an average year," he said. "Last year, we had a little less than average rainfall.

"Suffice it to say, it is an 88% reduction over what we would have had if we hadn't done any work."

James Clift, policy director for the Michigan Environmental Council, said many communities in Michigan also have reduced their volume of combined storm water and sewage overflows.

"We're looking down the pike and thinking there's some year where all of the cities have reduced their flow by 90% and we can see some change in water quality, see beach closings start to drop," he said.

Work remains to be done.

Combined sewer overflows in Detroit totaled 12.400 billion gallons in 2007.

Grand Rapids, the state's second-largest city, had 1.61 million gallons of combined sewer overflows in 2007 -- nearly 29 million gallons less than Port Huron.

Grand Rapids, said Cyndi Roper, executive director of the Michigan chapter of Clean Water Action, was "probably the first city with a serious combined sewer overflow problem to step up to the plate and start correcting the overflow problem."

In 2001, Clean Water Action released a report titled "Wasting Michigan's Water Wonderland" that found overflows from January 2000 to June 2001 had released 52 billion gallons of storm water and human and industrial waste into the state's waterways.

According to the DEQ, communities in Michigan since 1988 have eliminated 75% of the 613 untreated combined sewer outfalls that existed at that time.

In relation to Port Huron, Roper said "30.6 million, that still is a significant amount, but I think it is important to keep it in context with what it was.

"They've made remarkable progress, and we have done a lot to recognize and acknowledge those communities that have stepped up to the plate and have taken corrective action."

Clegg said when Port Huron began its state-mandated separation project in 1998, an area of 2,400 acres was served by combined sewers. That's down to 413 acres, a reduction of about 83%, he said.

The city has installed 105 miles of sanitary and storm sewer; 45 miles of water main; and repaved about 58 miles of street.

"Originally, about 53% of the city was served by combined sewers," he said. "We have that down to a very small percentage indeed."

He said in 1998, Port Huron had 19 locations that overflowed when it rained.

"Currently, we have eliminated 13 of those overflow points," Clegg said. "There are six currently operating.

"Our goal at the end of the project would be to have no overflow points in the **system**.

"We have four projects to cover the 413 acres left to go."

The state DEQ mandated the city separate its combined sewers as a condition of its National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System permit -- a federal program under the Clean Water Act, but one administered by the state.

It will take another eight years to complete Port Huron's sewer separation -- in 2007, the city asked for and received a four-year extension from the DEQ. The original deadline was Dec. 31, 2012. The deadline now is Dec. 31, 2016.

Clegg said the Port Huron City Council asked that the city request the extension to provide some relief to the city's rate payers.

According to a September 2007 report from City **Manager** Karl Tomion, extending the construction period would result in an average quarterly sewer and water rate of \$262.57 in 2011-12. Without the extension, the average rate in 2011-12 would have been \$299.37.

Once the project is complete, it will have for the most part eliminated a significant source of pollution in the St. Clair River.

It will not have totally eliminated, however, the possibility of sanitary sewer overflows, which are caused when storm water infiltrates sanitary sewer pipes and overloads the capacity of wastewater treatment plants.

In that scenario, sewage can back up into houses if not discharged as overflow.

It also will not eliminate non-point source pollution -- runoff carrying lawn chemicals such as pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers; oils and petroleum products from street surfaces; and soil and trash.

"We are going to make it even better," Clegg said, "but I'm not telling anybody that there are no pollutants going into the river.

"No matter what you do, there's another step you could take to do more."