

STAYING INFORMED: Sewer separation not frozen, looking at financial and environmental impact

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ALTON - With the Alton mayoral election occurring tomorrow, alongside several other ballot measures, several issues are being politicized by all four candidates running for office.

Recently, candidate Scott Dixon has questioned current Alton Mayor Brant Walker for not being open regarding an upcoming unfunded mandate regarding sewer separation measures. Dixon warned at the East End Improvement Association candidate forum the measure would cost taxpayers as much as \$80 million if the Walker administration continued and had to seek bonds to fund the \$50 million mandate (the extra \$30 million

would come from interest required from the issuance of those bonds). On the other side, however, Walker claims Dixon would raise sewer rates for Altonians by at least \$9.50 a month.

However, this issue is a serious one, and deserves more legitimacy than being used as ammunition for political attacks during an election season. Riverbender.com sent 10 questions to the City of Alton regarding the sewer separation. The city forwarded them to Steve Gibson, the city's wastewater treatment manager. Gibson has been working for the city for decades - under several otherwise opposing administrations.

Explain the unfunded mandate, and what is required for the sewer separation to occur.

"The mandate came from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA) Combined Sewer Overflow (CSO) Control Policy of 1994," Gibson replied in an email. "The CSO requires the separation of storm water and sewage when possible."

According to the USEPA, CSOs are described as the following:

Combined sewer systems are sewers that are designed to collect rainwater runoff, domestic sewage, and industrial wastewater in the same pipe. Most of the time, combined sewer systems transport all of their wastewater to a sewage treatment plant, where it is treated and then discharged to a water body. During periods of heavy rainfall or snow melt, however, the wastewater volume in a combined sewer system can exceed the capacity of the sewer system or treatment plant. For this reason, combined sewer systems are designed to overflow occasionally and discharge excess wastewater directly to nearby streams, rivers, or other water bodies. These overflows, called combined sewer overflows (CSOs), contain not only storm water but also untreated human and industrial waste, toxic materials, and debris. They are a major water pollution concern for the approximately 772 cities in the U.S. that have combined sewer systems. CSOs may be thought of as a type of "urban wet weather" discharge. This means that, like sanitary sewer overflows (SSOs) and storm water discharges, they are discharges from a municipality's wastewater conveyance infrastructure that are caused by precipitation events such as rainfall or heavy snow melt.

What are the costs of this project?

"The current cost estimate calculated by SMS Engineering of Alton, is \$50 million," Gibson said.

Why is the mandate currently paused, and by what body?

"The EPA has paused their mandate as they make recalculations on their requirements for these projects," Gibson said.

When it is begun, what will the city be forced to do in that time?

"The CSO Long Term Control Plan is being worked on by SMS Engineering and the Illinois EPA schedule of completion is on track," Gibson said.

A full document detailing the USEPA's CSO Long Term Control Plan was drafted in 1995 and can be found [here](#). It assists municipalities in the planning and overall work required for extensive sewer separations.

What government body is in charge of ensuring its completion?

"The Illinois EPA," Gibson responded.

What has been done already? How was that funded?

"Two of the six CSOs have been completed and paid for out of reserves," Gibson said.

Earlier in 2016, sewer separation work began on State Street, Walker said. Walker added he was the only mayor who has put any work into the unfunded mandate, which is among several such mandates (including police and fire pensions). In fact, most of those mandates have been weighing upon the city's overall debt burden for several decades and administrations.

While Walker may have been the first mayor in decades to address these issues, Dixon's website accuses Walker of costing taxpayers more than \$13 million, partially due to the sewer separation issues.

"Mayor Walker has known all along about the sewer separation deadline in 2021. Per a news release from our city's sewer plant director (Gibson) recently published in the news, our city must complete \$50 million in sewer separation work within the next four years. Only a small portion (one third) of the work has been done, and the sewer fund has only a few million dollars in the bank (true). The only reasonable way to raise that kind of money so quickly is to issue municipal bonds. Last year, municipal bond interest rates hit historic lows, averaging about 2.9 percent all last summer and into the fall (true). Walker should have acted and taken advantage of the record low interest rates. Rates have since increased about one percent (true), now averaging over 3.9 percent, and will likely continue to increase, given the FED chairperson's recent comments that they will likely increase rates at their next meeting. With about \$45 million of sewer work left to do, issuing a bond to pay for that work is going to cost you an extra

\$450,000 per year in additional interest expenses, which will add up to over \$13 million over the 30 year life of the typical municipal bond! That comes out to \$500 per person, or \$2,000 for a family of four, that Mayor Walker's failure to act just cost you!"

What has the city done to prepare for the mandate?

"The city is following the Illinois EPA schedule of completion, and we are fully prepared to resume work on separating the other combined sewer lines when the EPA allows us to," Gibson said.

How will the people of Alton benefit from the sewer separation once it is completed?

"There will be less contamination in the river," Gibson said.

What effects do people currently see by it not being separated?

"The Illinois EPA has determined that none of our CSO's discharge into a 'sensitive area,' as defined by the CSO Control Policy," Gibson said.

What has the current administration done to be proactive (if anything) with this issue?

"The city has begun to implement cutting edge sustainable practices to move the Alton Waste Water Treatment Plant to a zero net utility usage facility that will further offset any long term separation costs," Gibson said.

UPDATE: Story has been corrected after extensive research showed the sewer separation process has not been frozen and is still slated for a 2021 deadline.