

Press Release

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Burlington Agreement with River Protection Groups to Reduce Risk of Future Sewage Spills

In response to concerns brought by the Haw River Assembly and Cape Fear River Watch, the City of Burlington agreed late Tuesday, September 2, 2014, to take specific steps to improve its wastewater collection system.

In April, the two river protection groups, represented by the Southern Environmental Law Center, filed a notice of intent to sue to correct ongoing violations of the Clean Water Act. Under Tuesday's agreement, the groups agreed to withdraw the threat of legal action. In return, the City committed to (1) clean 20% of its sewer lines over the next three years (doubling the requirement under their collection system permit) and provide annual reports of these maintenance efforts; (2) notify the conservation groups no later than 24 hours after a sewage spill exceeding 10,000 gallons (to ensure prompt public notice when such events occur); (3) evaluate both the education and enforcement aspects of its Fats, Oils, and Grease program and submit a report to the conservation groups; (4) complete, pursuant to a set schedule, priority infrastructure projects designed to limit the likelihood of sewage spills; and (5) make stipulated payments for each day that the City fails to perform obligations under the agreement.

Elaine Chiosso, Haw Riverkeeper with the Haw River Assembly said "We are very pleased that the City of Burlington is undertaking these important steps to reduce the risks of future sewage spills into the Haw River and its tributaries. This agreement will protect people in Burlington, and downstream all the way to the Cape Fear River, who use the river for recreation and as a drinking water source. The popularity of paddling and hiking along the Haw River has greatly increased in recent years, and will only continue to do so if we have clean water."

In January, the City experienced a 3.5 million gallon raw sewage spill which prompted the legal action. Spills such as this have the potential to pose serious human health risks, degrade water quality, and harm aquatic life. The federal Clean Water Act authorizes citizens to sue to protect the public and the environment when there is inaction by the state and the threat of continuing violations. The Haw River is part of the Cape Fear River Basin, and it feeds into Jordan Lake, which serves as the drinking water supply for 300,000 North Carolinians and is an important recreational resource for the state.

Burlington Water Resources Director Bob Patterson said, “The City strives to protect the environment and the health and welfare of the citizens. We appreciate the Haw River Assembly and the Cape Fear River Watch working collaboratively with us to ensure that remains top priority. In this instance, we all have the same goal of reducing sanitary sewer overflows, so it makes sense for us to work together. Moving forward, we will be working jointly with these groups to protect and support the water quality and recreational activities enjoyed along the Haw River, its tributaries, and downstream waters.”

”The residents of Burlington and all North Carolinians downstream, will benefit from these efforts to reduce sewage spills. We commend the city for their willingness, early on, to work with us to identify how best to move forward, and ultimately we reached an agreement that was satisfactory to all parties” said Kemp Burdette, Cape Fear Riverkeeper.