

# Mayor Scott: Back River sewage plant issues “predate my administration” | Baltimore Brew

A day after the state [took control](#) of Baltimore’s Back River Wastewater Treatment Plant, Mayor Brandon Scott blamed his predecessors for allowing poor conditions to exist there.

Not addressing the state’s finding of “a precipitous decline” at the facility over the last few months, Scott said that Back River and the city-operated Patapsco treatment plants “have had issues that long predate my administration.”

“This will not be an overnight fix,” Scott said in a brief statement today, going on to urge that “we must work collaboratively and combine our resources” to protect communities and the environment.

The mayor’s remarks came after Secretary of the Environment Ben Grumbles ordered the Maryland Environmental Service (MES) to take charge of the Back River plant in order to correct “worsening” problems that are causing illegal sewage discharges into the Chesapeake Bay and risking a “catastrophic failure.”

MDE inspectors found extensive violations during inspections conducted at Back River last year in June, September and December.

But an inspection last week, MDE [said](#), “revealed significantly increased noncompliance.”

## “A great water system”

After becoming mayor 16 months ago, Scott recruited Jason Mitchell from Oakland, Calif., to become Baltimore’s new director of public works.

Last August, Mitchell promised a strategy to “achieve 100% compliance” after the environmental watchdog Blue Water Baltimore documented daily illegal discharges of millions of gallons of partially treated human waste from the Back River and Patapsco treatment plants.

In October, Scott promoted Yosef Kebede from acting to permanent chief of DPW’s Bureau of Water and Wastewater, responsible for the Back River and Patapsco plants.

In the swearing-in ceremony, Scott expressed confidence in Kebede, saying he “will continue to manage our water resources effectively . . . as we work to build and continue to have a great water system that we can all be proud of.”

## City “disappointed” in MDE

Environmental groups (including Blue Water Baltimore, which [filed](#) a federal

lawsuit to halt illegal sewage discharges from the treatment plants) said they were shocked to learn of further deteriorating conditions at Back River and relieved to learn that MES will be stepping in.

The nonprofit corporation, created by the state legislature in 1970, provides environmental and infrastructure services to various entities but mostly to state and local governments.

Scott officials have offered little information about what MDE says are worsening problems at the 110-year-old treatment facility.

Last week, a DPW spokesman said the city was “disappointed” by Grumbles’ order for the city to bring the plant into compliance.

Today mayoral spokesman James E. Bentley II said the city has been reaching out to MES for support for the last few months.

Asked if the city had sought assistance from MES, neither MES nor MDE are commenting.

UPDATE: MDE spokesman Jay Apperson provided this comment, to be attributed to MES:

*“The city engaged a private contractor, who then sought out MES to develop an agreement to perform the work at Back River Wastewater Treatment plant. By law, that agreement had to go through normal procurement processes which includes approval from the MES Board of Directors and the State Board of Public Works. The agreement was in that process when the emergency directive was issued from MDE.”*

## **Union: Address Staffing Issues**

The union representing treatment plant workers, meanwhile, pledged today to “follow the direction of leadership,” but warned that fixing Back River’s problems will require more resources.

“Neither the city nor the state can continue to under-staff and under-resource environmental agencies and expect to ensure the safety of our community,” the City Union of Baltimore said, in a statement released by communication director Ray Baker.

“Investments must be made in properly staffing the workers who keep our environment clean,” the statement continued. “This also includes making sure we are offering a competitive salary so we can retain the high-quality workers who are trained with the skills to keep our communities safe.”