

## Already troubled, Back River went downhill fast after dismissal of experienced senior staff | Baltimore Brew

The [precipitous decline](#) of Baltimore's Back River Waste Water Treatment Plant – currently illegally releasing millions of gallons of partly treated sewage daily into a Chesapeake Bay tributary – did not come out of nowhere.

A source of community complaints and environmental concerns for years, the facility has long been troubled.

But current and former employees say that staffers who had managed to hold the place together were pushed out, leading to conditions that plunged the plant's performance downward in the last year.

"This is what happens when your experienced senior people are let go because they don't fit into the style of the new boss," says Andre Johnson, the plant's former chief of maintenance.

Poor management was cited as a major factor by Ben Grumbles, secretary of the Maryland Department of the Environment (MDE), when he announced the unprecedented [takeover](#) of the sprawling facility operated by the Department of Public Works (DPW) in Dundalk.

"The real story is that Back River was stripped of knowledgeable people" – Andre Johnson, former maintenance manager.

"The real story is that Back River was stripped of knowledgeable people, and they've been replaced by bodies without a plan," Johnson told *The Brew*.

"It's now all about passing a loyalty test and being a team player," Johnson said.

Another source, who requested anonymity because of city policy that forbids employees to speak to the press, said this:

"We're led by an upper management that doesn't have the knowledge to understand the gravity of the situation."



Some of the hundreds of cleaning tanks at the Back River Waste Water Treatment Plant. (MDE)

### Firings and Resignations

Johnson was one of the top supervisors who were fired or forced to retire by Yosef Kebede, the incoming head of DPW's water and wastewater bureau.

In addition to Johnson, they include the former Back River plant manager Marshall Phillips, division superintendents Mike Gallagher and Anthony Galloway, and general superintendent Albert Greene.

Collectively, they had over 130 years of experience in wastewater management.

In their place, Kebede has installed as plant manager, Betty Jacobs, whose career was in safety, not sewage, and a new maintenance manager, Prim Rambissoon, who was an instrumentation technician.

### First Revealed in August

Kebede, a consultant engineer who joined DPW in 2019, did not respond to questions from *The Brew*.

Mayor Brandon Scott and DPW Director Jason Mitchell also did not address detailed questions about the impact of staff turnover on the plant's performance.

Late yesterday, DPW issued a press release that blamed supply-chain delays, a backlog of parts and "staff shortages exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic" for excessive levels of pollutants [dumped](#) into the Bay by the Back River and Patapsco water treatment plants, which were first publicly revealed by Blue Water Baltimore last August.

• [Baltimore's poor management at root of newly discovered sewage outflows into the Bay](#) (9/1/21)

The press release said that DPW "has been unable to, as yet, adequately compensate for the increasing numbers of seasoned staff retiring."

This statement came four days after Mayor Brandon Scott deflected blame for Back River's problems, saying they [predate](#) his administration.

## Whistleblower

A 39-year DPW veteran, Johnson was dismissed in February 2021 as Back River’s maintenance manager on what he calls trumped-up charges involving a consensual relationship with another employee. (His firing is now before the EEOC.)

His rise from a laborer to the head of a 165-person department was highlighted in [“DPW Proud Andre Johnson,”](#) a promotional video that is still being shown to new recruits.

In the clip, Johnson enthuses about his job (“I like dealing with complicated equipment”) and his strategy for career advancement (“I went back and got a mechanical engineering degree.”)

He also speaks passionately about DPW’s “obligation to maintain good-quality water” for residents and the environment.

He told *The Brew* that he’s willing to speak on the record about plant operations to help the public understand what went wrong.

“There were long-term problems at Back River – absolutely. But the problems got worse after the people who understood them were let go,” he reflected this week.

## Appeals Unheeded

After becoming head of maintenance in 2009, “I tried to forewarn them” – them being former DPW directors Al Foxx and Rudy Chow – “that we had to make smart capital investments to keep the plant going.”

He said his appeals went largely unheeded as upper DPW management focused on the \$430 million Headworks project, which was completed last year to store excess rainwater that infiltrates the city’s aging sewer system during heavy storms.

“When I couldn’t get help from my supervisors, I had to rely on my subordinates and use what we had available,” he said.



A still from “DPW Proud Andre Johnson,” a video profiling Back River’s former maintenance manager. ([publicworks.baltimorecity.gov](http://publicworks.baltimorecity.gov))

## Scooping Muck into a Dumpster

A cardinal principle of wastewater management is redundancy – having enough equipment on hand to routinely take machinery off-line for cleaning and repair.

“That’s what got me on the wrong side of Mr. Kebede,” he said. “The primary settling tanks were getting badly clogged with sediment or muck.”

“While I was trying to figure out how to use my people to fix the problem, he was complaining that I wasn’t keeping the grass mowed.”

“While I was trying to figure out how to fix the problem, he was complaining that I wasn’t keeping the grass mowed” – Andre Johnson.

Johnson said he worked out a plan for ground crews to cut the grass from 7-11 a.m., then work in the afternoon and evening on the giant circular tanks, some of them 600 feet in diameter.

“We’d drain the water from the tank and lower down a dumpster and a bobcat,” he said.

“The bobcat would scoop up tons of sediment that had settled in the tank and put it in the dumpster. We’d haul up the dumpster and get the muck over to the drying bins. Then we’d use high-pressure hoses to clean out the center and the clogged pipes.”



Yosef Kebede, head of DPW's Bureau of Water and Wastewater, testifies before the Board of Estimates last year. (CharmTV)

Thanks to these efforts, four of the plant's 11 settling tanks were kept in operation at the end of 2020, with two more almost ready to return to service.

That was enough – just barely, he said – to handle the daily flow of 120 million gallons of wastewater through the plant. But the crews were exhausted, and he kept getting flak from Kebede.

"At the end of the day, what he wanted was the grounds to look pristine. And what I wanted was not to pollute the river."

(The bulk of the treated effluent goes into Back River under a 2018 discharge permit regulated by MDE. A small but significant amount is still diverted to Sparrows Point, where it once cooled steel made by Bethlehem Steel.)

Last week, an MDE [inspection](#) found that only *one* of the 11 settling tanks worked properly, and another worked erratically, hobbled by a clogged scum trough.

### **\$500,000 Fix Needed**

Johnson said the settling tanks could be made to work if DPW was willing to spend about \$500,000 on mechanical overhauls.

Despite being a fraction of the cost of the Headworks project, his effort stalled internally. So Johnson said he approached the city's procurement office to try to get out a vendor contract.

It didn't happen either, he said, and raw sewage remains raw as it bypasses daily the giant inactive tanks.



An inoperable settling tank clogged with hardened sediment at Back River. (3/22/22 inspection by MDE)

That was just one of the operational failures found by MDE. The plant, for example, boasts four centrifuges to process solids throughout the treatment process.

Two were working during Johnson's last days on the job, and a third was waiting for parts.

Today *all* of them are out of service, and DPW relies on portable centrifuges supplied by a vendor.

## High Grass and FOG

As early as last June, an MDE inspector noted that solids were not being removed properly by the portable centrifuges and "sludge wasting" had become a problem.

What's more, filters for nitrogen removal were out of service, as were 21 of 48 sand filters – some with mechanical issues, others simply lacking sand.

Thick mats of reed grass, vines and other vegetation were befouling the secondary clarifiers – so much for keeping the plant's front lawn pristine – while emulsified fats, oil and grease (FOG) prevented the majority of clarifier filters from operating as designed.



A secondary clarifier at Back River is filled with algae, reed grasses and other vegetation. (MDE)

The situation flagrantly violated the U.S. Clean Water Act and – criticized first by Blue Water Baltimore and eventually by MDE – the Scott administration pledged to do better.

"The root causes for the violations have been identified by DPW and will be addressed systematically to ensure we achieve 100% compliance," Jason Mitchell, Scott's newly appointed DPW director, said in a prepared statement last September.

Knowing the staffing and maintenance issues confronting Back River, Johnson scoffed at the miraculous cleansing of the dirty wastewater any time soon.

And instead of compliance, an inspection last week by MDE revealed so many "ongoing and escalating problems" that Secretary Grumbles – his agency already [under fire](#) for lax enforcement – gave Baltimore City 48 hours to make the plant fully compliant with its discharge permit.

When that didn't happen, Grumbles appointed the quasi-public Maryland Environmental Service to take temporary control of the plant's management – a move that the Scott administration says it will appeal.

— Fern Shen contributed to this story.

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**The Brew received the following statement last night from spokesman James Bentley on behalf of Mayor Scott and Director Mitchell:**

*The mayor is fully apprised of the facts and circumstances and personally discussed the situation with Secretary Grumbles last Friday evening. The director responded to the violations that he inherited within nine weeks of his appointment by instituting enterprise-wide changes to address DPW's actions, executing an emergency procurement authorization to start addressing DPW's staffing gaps, equipment, and part needs, procuring contract services, and creating a strategic plan to address the violations, instituting an enterprise compliance program to ensure quality assurance, mandating a full assessment via gap analysis, and most recently ensuring the city funded the millions of dollars needed for the remediation of the plants.*

*DPW is committed to assessing and addressing conditions at Back River and Patapsco plants, ensuring that it employs a strategic approach to managing and operating the plants to guarantee the city has a permanent fix to the various issues the plants face today. We welcome the MDE and MES collaboration going forward.*