

Progress report on Baltimore's failing Back River sewage plant, due yesterday, has not surfaced | Baltimore Brew

The quasi-governmental agency placed in charge of Baltimore's Back River Waste Water Treatment Plant appears to have missed the deadline to report back its assessment of the facility to Maryland officials.

In March, then-Secretary of the Environment Ben Gumbles ordered the Maryland Environmental Service (MES) to not only [assume control](#) of the troubled plant, but to "submit a report. . . of its findings and recommendations" by June 6 – yesterday.

The missed deadline reflects another failure by city and state officials to operate the facility properly and disclose the problems there fully, says Delegate Robin L. Grammer Jr.

"It's unacceptable – what we need is transparency and once again we're not getting it," Grammer said, speaking with *The Brew*.

"We've had this issue develop and drag out for years. Not only is the public not being made aware of it, but the representatives are not being made aware of what's going on at this facility we have no control over," he continued.

The 6th District Republican, who said he is writing a letter of complaint to MDE, said the late report raises questions about the state's commitment to correcting management and understaffing problems that have severely impacted the sewage treatment process.

"That report would be a different level of information from the bits and pieces we're hearing – it would be legally binding, it would show a level of scrutiny," Grammer said.

The temporary MES takeover was ordered in the wake of reports from MDE and environmental watchdogs documenting that Back River has been releasing hundreds of millions of gallons of poorly treated sewage and polluting the Chesapeake Bay in violation of the Clean Water Act.

Run by the Baltimore City Department of Public Works, it is located in eastern Baltimore County where residents and lawmakers, including Grammer, have long complained of the fecal odor and fouled waterways.

An inspection report released before the takeover showed spiking nutrient and bacteria levels and included photos of tanks and channels clogged with backed-up solids, reed grasses and other vegetation.



Sample of the debris found in April next to the effluent pipe at the Back River plant, taken by volunteers from the Back River Restoration Committee. (Mark Reutter)

Another “takeover” target?

MDE has not responded to emails from *The Brew* asking whether the report was completed and why it has not been made available to the public.

[See 6:20 p.m. UPDATE from MDE below.]

MES also has not replied to requests for information on the missing report.

Grammer said he had heard “anecdotally” that the city employees at the plant “are not cooperating with MES on the operational level.”

In April, lawyers for the city [filed](#) a motion in Baltimore City Circuit Court declaring the takeover unlawful and unnecessary.

Meanwhile, the Hogan administration is under pressure to place MES in charge of Baltimore’s other sewage treatment facility, the Patapsco Waste Water Treatment Plant, in the wake of a [scathing inspection report](#) on the Curtis Bay facility.



The “final effluent” that Baltimore’s Patapsco Wastewater Treatment Plant sends into the river. (MDE inspection report)

Both plants are the subjects of lawsuits filed by MDE and by two nonprofits, Blue Water Baltimore and Chesapeake Legal Alliance, over pollution violations.

The violations include releases of high levels of bacteria and nutrients, such as nitrogen and phosphorous, that degrade the Bay and its tributaries by promoting algae growth that robs the water of oxygen and kills aquatic life.

Blue Water Baltimore’s sampling of the waters outside of the Patapsco plant last year called attention to the illegal releases, triggering inspections by MDE and

drawing public attention to chronic failures at the plants.

UPDATE: MDE spokesman Jay Apperson provided this statement after publication:

“As called for in the Maryland Department of the Environment’s March 27 directive regarding the Back River Wastewater Treatment Plant, the Maryland Environmental Service submitted a report to MDE of its findings and recommendations on the plant’s operation, maintenance, staffing and equipment by June 6. MDE will submit that report to the Maryland General Assembly in tandem with an MDE report on the Back River facility, as requested by the General Assembly. MDE expects to make these reports public in the coming days.”