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## New governance rules proposed in wake of Baltimore water and wastewater system failures

Mayor Scott and County Executive Olszewski journey to Annapolis as lawmakers propose a task force to explore a possible regional water authority

Above: Baltimore Mayor Brandon Scott and Baltimore County Executive Johnny Olszewski announce legislation to create a Regional Water Governance Task Force. (CharmTV)

The leaders of Baltimore City and County came together today to announce the formation of a state task force to study overhauling the troubled system that provides water to both jurisdictions as well as to residents in surrounding counties.

At an Annapolis news conference, they stressed the age of a 1972 agreement in which the Baltimore Department of Public Works provides drinking water and wastewater services beyond its borders.

"This agreement is older than the mayor and myself, and it does not reflect the incredible growth across the region since it was put in place," said Baltimore County Executive Johnny Olszewski.

Mayor Brandon Scott sounded the same theme, calling for cooperation to bring water and wastewater management in the region "up to the 21st century."

"The county executive and I didn't create this system," Scott pointed out. "We all know how outdated infrastructure is not just here, but throughout the country."

There was no hint that the region's water and wastewater troubles go beyond aging pipes and outdated billing software until Serena McIlwain, acting secretary of the Maryland Department of the Environment (MDE), came to the microphone.

It fell to McIlwain to briefly reference the system's systemic recent failures – chief among them massive illegal releases of partly treated sewage from the Back River and Patapsco wastewater treatment plants.

Last year, amid reports of sludge-clogged settling tanks and workers sleeping on the job, the state [took over](#) management of Back River, which is located just outside the city line in Dundalk.

Environmentalists have decried the impact of the [pollution releases](#) on the Chesapeake Bay, and residents have complained of the [foul odors](#) on waterways where they live.

Improving cooperation among local governments, McIlwaine said, "would be a big step forward to ensuring that the region's drinking water and wastewater facilities maintain compliance with their permits and our environmental law."

"We at MDE are committed to assisting the Back River and Patapsco communities with funding for completion of capital projects and facility and equipment upgrades as well as to provide long-term

"We continue to work with the city to get the plants fully in compliance – and resilient. Resilient – that's the key word."



An inoperable settling tank clogged with hardened sediment found at the Back River treatment plant last March. (MDE)

## Still Polluting

Reacting to today's announcement, the Chesapeake Bay Foundation said the proposed task force was a first step toward fixing a system with "serious flaws," not only regarding inadequate sewage treatment, but "numerous customer service issues."

"We hope this task force gets to the bottom of the troubling issues that have plagued the water and wastewater systems," said CBF senior scientist Doug Myers.

In the statement that CBF released, state officials also came in for criticism.

CBF said that despite the state's partial takeover of Back River and stepped-up inspections at Patapsco – both prompted by a citizen environmental group's findings – pollution releases have been reduced, but not enough.

"The latest MDE inspection report from the Patapsco plant shows it's still struggling to meet its pollution permit limits due to service and maintenance failures," CBF said.

"Excessive pollution discharges from the two wastewater treatment plants operated by Baltimore," the group said, "are [compromising](#) efforts in Maryland to meet Chesapeake Bay cleanup requirements. "

## "Effective and equitable"

Olszewski and Scott were joined by the sponsors of legislation to create the "Task Force on Regional Water and Wastewater."

They are State senators Jill Carter and Charles E. Sydnor and delegates Eric Ebersole and Stephanie Smith.

"This will ensure that we are able to achieve a modern governance structure that effectively and equitably serves our residents," Carter said.

Sydnor, who represents Baltimore County's 44th District, reminded the gathering of another serious water system failure – last year's Labor Day weekend contamination of drinking water by health-harming [E. coli bacteria](#) found in West Baltimore water samples.

"After having the communities that I serve subjected to a five-day [boil water advisory](#) because of the *E. coli* contamination last September," Sydnor said, "I am pleased to stand with everyone that's up here and take this regional approach which is just an initial step to address this pressing issue that we all have stakes in solving."