Sewage Backups in Baltimore Homes

Introduction

Sewage backups are a big problem in Baltimore City. When heavy rain overwhelms Baltimore’s aging pipes, sewage has no place to go but up and out into people’s basement floor drains, toilets, showers, and washing machines. These backups happen thousands of times each year and put residents’ health, homes, and livelihoods at risk.

What’s Causing Sewage Backups in Baltimore?

- Heavy rain and flooding cause large amounts of water to leak into Baltimore’s sanitary sewer system - the pipes that were only designed to carry sewage.
- When the sewer system becomes too full, sewage has nowhere to go other than back up into street-level manholes, or the pipes in people’s homes.
- Baltimore’s sewer system was originally built with structured sewage outfalls, which release sewage into local streams when the system is too full.
- Since 2002, Baltimore City has been under a federal order - or Consent Decree - to end all sewage overflows.
- As the city has worked to close these outfalls as part of the Consent Decree, sewage backups into residents’ homes have dramatically increased.
- Mainline and lateral-line blockages occur when fats, oils, grease, trash, non-flushable wipes, etc. are poured or flushed into the system.
How is Baltimore City Addressing Sewage Backups?

- In April 2018, Baltimore City’s Department of Public Works (DPW) launched a Pilot Expedited Reimbursement Program\(^1\) to help residents with the costs of cleanup for backups that occur from heavy rains.
- Applicants can receive up to $5,000 to reimburse costs for pumping out sewage and disinfecting soiled spaces. Funds cannot be used to cover other costs, such as repairs, property loss, or lost wages.
- In the first two years of the Pilot Program, more than 11,000 sewage backups were reported to Baltimore City’s 311 service.\(^2\)
- Only 95 of those reports applied for reimbursement, demonstrating the lack of awareness of the program. DPW denied all but 12 applications.\(^3\)
- DPW only paid out $14,775 (<1%) of the $4 million set aside for reimbursement in the first two years of the Pilot Program.
- DPW has denied applications on the basis that backups weren’t caused by wet weather. Many of these denied claims happened on days with verified and widespread wet-weather sewage overflows elsewhere in the City.

Blue Water Baltimore’s Response

Baltimore City must do more to help its residents. There are fundamental problems with the design and administration of the Expedited Reimbursement Program. Blue Water Baltimore supports the following key actions to improve the program:

- The City should assume responsibility for a sewage backup until proven otherwise; for both wet-weather surcharging and mainline blockages.
- The arbitrary $5,000 cap on reimbursement should be removed.
- Full reimbursement should be available for property loss AND cleanup costs.
- The Program must be advertised more robustly.
- The City should provide direct and immediate cleanup assistance to residents who experience a backup in their home, in both wet and dry weather conditions.

On March 24, 2021 from 10am-noon the Health, Environment, and Technology Committee of the Baltimore City Council will hold a public investigative hearing on sewage backups in the City. It will take place virtually and you can join online here. Have you experienced a sewage backup into your home? Make your voice heard about how the program is working for you, and what needs to change. You can testify during the hearing, or submit written testimony prior to the hearing.

\(^1\)Baltimore City Department of Public Works. Building Backups. Retrieved from https://publicworks.baltimorecity.gov/sewer-consent-decree/building-backups