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After Sandy: treating sewage by hand while waiting for repair funds to flow



By Steve Strunsky/The Star-Ledger
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Passaic Valley Sewerage Commission Executive Director Michael DeFrancisci said FEMA money will help repair damage to the Newark treatment plant. Behind him is a New York City Department of Environmental Protection tanker unloading sewage sludge to be drained of water at the the PVSC plant. Steve Strunsky/The Star-Ledger

NEWARK — New elbow joints, lengths, pipe and other replacement parts awaited installation as the smell of sewage filled the air and heavy machinery echoed loudly at work today in a basement room of the Passaic Valley Sewerage Commission plant once submerged by Hurricane Sandy's storm surge.

After the PVSC was flooded with 200 million gallons of sea water from Newark Bay, forcing it to discharge billions of gallons of raw or partially treated sewage, officials of the nation's fifth largest sewage treatment facility told reporters and municipal officials touring the plant today that it had been in compliance with discharge standards since Nov. 23.

"I'm impressed," said Alan Neggia, a deputy public works superintendent from Fair Lawn, one of 48 municipalities in Bergen, Hudson, Essex, Passaic and Union Counties served by the PVSC.

But the 150-acre bayside plant, with more than 50 buildings, dozens of settling tanks and other treatment apparatus, has been operating manually for the past six months, unable to issue bonds to replace its automated flow control system and better maintain the delicate biochemical balance needed to treat an average daily flow of 110 million gallons of waste water. Right now, officials said, plant employees must open and close valves and otherwise direct the flow of sewage by hand at scattered locations around the sprawling plant.

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"It's very difficult to get the flow balance when you're doing it manually," said Bridget McKenna, the plant's chief operating officer. "That balance is very important."



Replacement parts await installation in an underground equipment room at the Passaic Valley Sewerage Authority Plant in Newark, which was flooded by sea water from Newark Bay when the storm surge from Hurricane Sandy disabled the plant last October. Steve Strunsky/The Star-Ledger

The seven-member commission cannot issue bonds because its board has not had a quorum since early 2011, when Gov. Chris Christie forced all but one of the members to resign in the wake of widespread nepotism and other abuses exposed by The Star-Ledger.

Since then, Christie has made two nominations to the commission, but both have been blocked by State Sen. Ronald Rice (D-Essex), whose district includes the PVSC plant. Rice says Newark pays 40 percent of the PVSC's budget, and he will continue using his informal power to block nominees under senatorial courtesy until the governor names a commissioner of the City Council's choosing.

In the past, that person has been the senator's son, Councilman Ronald Rice Jr. Neither the senator nor his councilman son responded to requests for comment today.

But a fellow council member, Ras Baraka, reiterated his support for the younger Rice to represent Newark on the commission as the city's strongest, most knowledgeable advocate on PVSC issues.

"We need the governor of this state to understand that Newark needs to be treated fairly," Baraka said.

The acting city council president, Anibal Ramos, issued a statement insisting, "it's only fair that Newark have representation on the PVSC board," while expressing some flexibility on just who that should be.

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"While Ron Rice Jr. was previously nominated, the council is not wedded to any one person," Ramos stated.

"The governor's office has not reached out to the Newark Municipal Council about this matter," Ramos added. "We encourage our representatives in Trenton to work with the governor's office to resolve this issue quickly."

The governor's spokesman, Michael Drewniak, declined to comment.

Bonding is not the only potential funding source for Sandy-related repairs to the plant. The plant had been awarded \$15 million by the Federal Emergency Management Agency as of April, and more money is likely, said PVSC Executive Director Michael DeFrancisci. DeFrancisci said the commission has submitted 45 individual "work sheets" to FEMA, each detailing necessary repairs and their estimated costs, and planned to submit another 45 or so.

The automated flow control system is one of countless technologies, structures or pieces of equipment that need repair or replacement, including wiring and other electrical equipment that has been rebuilt, but whose lifespan has been diminished substantially due to factors including corrosion from exposure to salt.

Officials have estimated the total value of the plant's Sandy-related damage at more than \$200 million. But DeFrancisci backed away from that figure today, saying the total was hard to pin down because of the fluidity of the repair process.