Manitoba

'Every litre counts': City pleads for Winnipeggers to limit water use as massive sewage spill continues

City asks 90,000 customers in Winnipeg to reduce use after sewage pipe in Red River broke Feb. 7

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Untreated sewage has been flowing into the Red River near Fort Garry Bridge since Feb. 7, when a pipe that crossed under the river broke. (Trevor Brine/CBC)

comments

The City of Winnipeg wants some 90,000 residences and businesses in the southwest area of the city to know that every little bit of water they can keep from flowing into the sewer system helps, after a pipe crossing under the Red River near Fort Garry Bridge broke two weeks ago.

"Every litre counts," Tim Shanks, the city's water and waste director, told reporters at city hall on Wednesday.

"Anything you can do to reduce that water coming through your house

and going down the drain will help us on the other end."

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On Tuesday, the city asked residents and businesses in St. Norbert, Fort Richmond, Richmond West, Waverley West, Bridgwater, Linden Woods, Linden Ridge, Whyte Ridge, Waverley Heights and at the University of Manitoba to take shorter showers, hold off on washing their cars and take other steps to lower their water usage.

That plea came nearly two weeks after one of the two pipes that cross underneath the Red River near the Fort Garry Bridge, which carry sewage to the South End Sewage Treatment Plant, started leaking — spilling about 228 million litres of untreated wastewater into the river as of Wednesday at midnight, Shanks said.

"It's very important to everybody involved ... to try to get this resolved as soon as possible," he said.

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A look at the temporary system carrying sewage across Winnipeg's Red River

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Drone footage shows the Fort Garry Bridge area where untreated sewage is leaking into the Red River after an underwater pipe broke. Tim Shanks, the City of Winnipeg's water and waste director, explains the temporary system set up on the bridge.

The city found issues with both pipes, each built in 1970, during a regular inspection last November and took one out of service.

The remaining pipe was in "rough condition" but was believed to be capable of carrying the sewage by itself, said Shanks.

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In December, the city started ordering pipes, specialized pumps and other equipment for a bypass system. Work on that system began on Feb. 5.

Southwest Winnipeg residents asked to limit water use as sewage continues to spill into Red River

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However, the working pipe failed on Feb. 7 — sooner than the city expected it to, Shanks said.

"It's a very hard technical thing to do, to try to put an exact date on when a pipe's going to fail," he said.

"This failed before we were able to plan for its replacement."



Crews were seen working near the sewage spill on Wednesday. The city hopes a new bypass system made up of temporary pipes will be up and running by the end of the week. (Travis Golby/CBC)

The city has sped up its work on the bypass system, and though it's been running since Feb. 17, it's not fully complete — only one of the two pumps needed for the system is running. The other pump had to be retested after crews found issues with it last week.

The one working pump "doesn't have the capacity to keep up with all the sewage flow that's coming across the river. So the problem is, during peak hours when sewage flow is at its highest, that temporary pump is not keeping up," Shanks said, leading the city to ask residents in the southwest to reduce the flow by cutting back water use.

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The city is continuing work on the bypass system, which runs above ground over the Fort Garry Bridge. Crews expect to get the second pump working by the end of the week.

Once fully operational, it's hoped that system will run until the city can build a permanent replacement under the river, which could take up to two years, said Shanks.

He said this is the first time he can recall pleading with so many customers to limit their water use, other than during floods.

"It certainly is a large-volume event and very concerning to us."



Tim Shanks, director of the city's water and waste department, spoke to reporters on Wednesday about the spill. (Travis Golby/CBC)

Southwest Winnipeg resident Mila Sailer said he didn't know the city had asked residents to cut back their water use until a CBC reporter told him about it during an interview outside his home Wednesday.

He said that won't be an issue for him though, since there are only two people in his home. But Sailer thinks the city should plan better when it comes to its old infrastructure.

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"The city should know better. If it's old, they should plan for replacement," he said.

St. Norbert resident David Armstrong said he believes the pipe would not have failed if the city had been more proactive with its maintenance.

"The infrastructure is getting too old and better planning and maintenance needs to be done to replace aging infrastructure."

The impacts of the spill go far beyond the city limits, as the river carries the sewage north to Lake Winnipeg. The lake is already overloaded with nutrients from upriver, and Winnipeg Beach Mayor Pam Jackson worries this spill will make matters worse.

"It's so upsetting. It's so disconcerting. This should not be happening. Our lake is at risk anyways, and to have this kind of raw sewage pouring into it is just not OK," Jackson told *Radio Noon* guest host Cory Funk in an interview on Wednesday.

Province investigating spill

Installing the new pump system is complicated, Shanks said. The city is working with permanent infrastructure that isn't built to accommodate the new system, which crews are trying to "shoehorn in."

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"We are working with trying to fit an engineered solution into this existing location that will be reliable in the long term," he said.

The city could be fined by the province for the spill, Shanks said.

In a written statement to CBC News, provincial Environment Minister Tracy Schmidt said her department has started an investigation into the leak with the environmental compliance and enforcement branch.

"We continue to observe water quality to help assess the impacts of the spill," she said in the statement.



Winnipeggers asked to help city mitigate the continued flow of sewage into the Red River

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With files from Cameron MacLean, Lindsay Aïda Gueï and Rachel Ferstl

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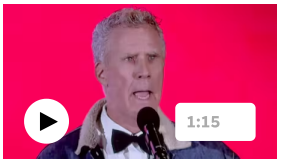

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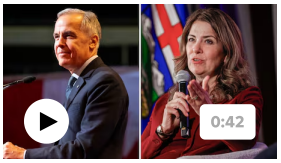

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