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\$136m Hudson sewage cleanup plan reached

\$136M effort designed to improve Hudson River water quality

By Brian Nearing

Published 8:12 pm, Thursday, January 16, 2014

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Members of the press gather on the Corning Preserve walkway for an announcement by State Department of Environmental Conservation Commissioner Joe Martens on \$136 Million in upgrades to improve Hudson River water quality on Thursday, Jan. 16, 2014 in Albany, N.Y. (Lori Van Buren / Times Union)



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Albany

Thursday marked the beginning of the end for days when heavy rains will cause hundreds of millions of gallons of raw municipal sewage from the Capital Region to spill into the Hudson River.

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Environmental Conservation Commissioner Joe Martens stood at the river shoreline in the Corning Preserve to announce a \$136 million plan to drastically reduce spills in coming years.

The plan is backed by Albany and Rensselaer counties, the cities of Albany, Troy, Watervliet, Rensselaer, and Cohoes and the village of Green Island. The sewer systems serve about 150,000 homes and businesses.

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For decades, the aging systems have been fouling the river with about 1.2 billion gallons annually in rain-fueled sewage spills — called combined sewer overflows. Occurring about 90 times a year, the spills have made the Capital Region section of the Hudson its most sewage-tainted and often unsafe for swimming, boating and fishing.

Signed by Martens on Wednesday, the sewer rebuilding plan would cut the spills by 85 percent over the next 15 years, but most improvements should be done within a decade. He praised the agreement, which has taken eight years to achieve, as ambitious and costly.

As the Times Union reported in November, the single largest part of the plan calls for a disinfection system to be added at the region's single largest source for spilled sewage, a project that Martens said could cost as much as \$50 million.

Located on the Hudson just north of the Port of Albany, a pipe known as "Big C" handles water for about three quarters of the city of Albany and accounts for about 45 percent of the total overflows in the region. Disinfection would kill harmful bacteria found in untreated sewage before it left the pipe.

Other portions of the proposal include:

Rebuilding of sewage treatment plants in Albany and Rensselaer counties to increase the amount of sewage that could be processed.

Reconstruction of sewer lines to include more holding areas, in which storm surges could be kept until the plants were able to process the excess.

Separation of some combined sewer lines, in which both sewage and rainwater run through the same pipes. Storm water does not require processing at sewer plants.

The plan replaces an earlier \$110 million proposal in 2011 that was rejected as inadequate by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency because it proposed removing only about a quarter of the sewage overflows.

"We were underwhelmed by that plan," said Paul Gallay, president of Hudson Riverkeeper, a not-for-profit that been routinely testing the river's sewage levels for the last eight years. "This plan takes the Capital Region from the bottom of the heap to the top of the heap. It is a turning point."

Martens said EPA supports the revised plan, which meets the federal standard of removing 85 percent of sewage overflows. "The EPA is always encouraged when (such) plans are developed, and we look forward to reviewing the plan and working with DEC on implementation," said EPA spokeswoman Mary Mears.

Projections done as part of the rejected, less expensive plan forecast that residential and commercial sewer rates could climb substantially — by up to 60 percent or more over a decade

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— to pay for the work.

It was unclear Thursday how the new, more costly plan might affect rates.

Assemblyman [John McDonald](#), a Cohoes Democrat and the city's former mayor, said the plan did "the right thing for the environment and the right thing for ratepayers." But he said he did not have figures on how rates might be impacted. "Bills would have been much higher if we had gone it alone," he said.

Albany Mayor [Kathy Sheehan](#) also said she had "no data" for how the rebuilding plan might affect sewer rates. "The goal is to have as little impact as possible," she said. "When I appoint my new water commissioner, this is the first thing that I will have them work on."

Martens said the state hopes to support project expenses though the use of both low-interest loans, from the state [Environmental Facilities Corp.](#), and grants, although no specific commitments are in place. "The state will be an active partner," he said.

Costs of the project will be apportioned among the municipalities based on how much sewage they contribute, as well as the local population, said [James Tierney](#), a deputy DEC commission for water quality. Albany and Troy will be bearing the bulk of the costs, he added.

As part of the agreement, the municipalities also agreed to pay a \$99,000 fine for pollution violations under the U.S. Clean Water Act for past spills. Because of spills, the region's sewer systems have been in violation of federal law for years.

EPA has been pushing for changes before they will sign off on new pollution permits for sewage treatment plants in Albany and Rensselaer counties, which now operate under DEC extensions, rather than permit renewals. Otherwise, Rensselaer County's permit would have expired in July 2011, Albany County's in December 2011 and Watervliet's in January 2012.

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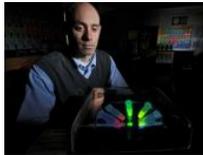
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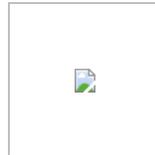
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