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New Bills: Stormwater Fixes

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November 13, 2007

With every powerful rainfall, gallons of sewage can overflow into the city's waterways, threatening its ecological balance. Councilmember James Gennaro, chairman of the City Council's Environmental Protection Committee, would like to change that.

Last month, the councilmember introduced three bills that strive to naturally prevent pollutants from entering the city's waterways.

Creating A Sustainable Stormwater System

When more than one-tenth of an inch of rain falls in the city, the stormwater system, 60 percent of which is connected to the sewer system, can overflow. As a result, sewage spills into the New York harbor, contaminating waterways and making surrounding areas unsafe for recreational activities.

Some estimates contend as much as 27 billion gallons of raw sewage and polluted stormwater discharge into the New York harbor every year.

Advocates, like the coalition group [Storm Water Infrastructure Matters](#), have long called for a sewer system overhaul to protect and preserve the city's waterways. Cost estimates for such an expansive project, such as increasing the number of the city's underground sewage storage tanks, are significant and a complete renovation is not currently on the city's agenda. Though the city's [Department of Environmental Protection](#) is enhancing its natural stormwater collection system on Staten Island.

Mayor Michael Bloomberg's [PlaNYC 2030](#) also addresses stormwater management and water quality by aiming to keep stormwater out of the city's

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already strained system naturally.

Gennaro, though, has introduced legislation ([Intro 630](#)) calling for the city to develop and implement a detailed sustainable stormwater management plan, which would include environmentally friendly development practices specific to every waterway.

"We have to continue with common sense solutions, and we can't ignore the role Mother Nature would play," said Gennaro at a press conference on the City Hall steps. "It is critical to create legislation that will succeed the Bloomberg administration and my tenure as chairman of the (Environmental Protection) Committee."

Over the last century, Gennaro said the city has lost 86 percent of its wetlands throughout the New York harbor area from pollution, in part due to the combined sewer system.

Under the legislation, development in the city would use green technology, including green roofs, permeable pavement, rain gardens and swales, to keep stormwater from entering the system. The plan would look at all of the city's waterways and address specific solutions for each. If the legislation were approved, the city would have to draft a plan and submit it to the City Council by next spring.

Natural Solutions

Gennaro has also proposed legislation ([Intro 629](#)) that would require any capital projects done by the city to minimize its impact on the city's stormwater infrastructure by incorporating green technologies.

With every new project or development, open space and naturally permeable surfaces disappear. Incorporating green technology into the project now could offset the environmental impact later. Under the legislation, the city's Department of Environmental Protection would set the requirements, which could include green roofs and rain gardens.

In the meantime, Gennaro has also proposed [a bill](#) (Intro 628) to require tree plantings be done to best address stormwater absorption. A million trees are slated for planting throughout the city, according to Bloomberg's [PlaNYC](#). With that amount, the councilmember said, a significant amount of stormwater could be kept out of the system.

"Currently there are 460 outfalls, by some estimates, in all five boroughs that discharge raw sewage and rain," said Larry Levine of the Natural Resources Defense Council. "About a third of all of the public access points to the waterfront around the city are within three city blocks (of the outfalls). This is a problem that affects all of us here in New York."

Advocates claim as the city continues to develop its waterfronts, keeping a clean environment there is increasingly important.

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