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A small building is submerged in the flood water of the Catawba River on Riverside Drive on Saturday, September 28, 2024.

Blue Ridge Mountains in McDowell County, where the river starts, and here, Rozzelle said.

Much of that pollution will eventually make its way to Charlotte.

"There may have been larger spills in this county, but I think you have to look at everything upstream," he said.

CONTAMINANTS CAUSE CONCERN

Nancy Hiemstra's home overlooks Mountain Island Lake, where some of the area's worst flooding happened. She knows something changed after Helene. The lake smells, she said, and she's seen a film on its surface.

Since the storm, Hiemsrta, who is on city water, has filtered and boiled it before drinking, she told The Observer. Her home sits downstream of a number of spills, including the 309,000 gallons that spilled in Newton.

Treating water piped to homes by Charlotte Water is not necessary, Rozzelle said. The city is purifying that drinking water and, he stressed, it is safe to drink.

But the Catawba River is contaminated with sewage and other pollutants, Rozzelle acknowledged. In addition to sewage, manufacturing chemicals, gasoline, oil and heavy metals, some of which are carcinogenic, and even human remains were likely washed into it, he said.

The contamination shouldn't prevent residents from rebuilding. But it should prevent them from going into the water for now, he said.

"I would not be surprised if anything is floating in the water right now," Rozzelle said. "Some seen. Some unseen."

seen.



Charlotte Fire Dept

Firefighters battle a construction site blaze in SouthPark in May 2023.

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FIRE

were about a football field away from the only exit at the time of the call, raising questions about the safety of the construction site.

After the incident, the fire department revealed the apartment complex, Modera SouthPark, didn't alert officials about construction and progress, as Mecklenburg County requires. Observer reporting also probed deeper into fire science expert worries about the prevalence of wood-frame buildings like the one in SouthPark. Fire prevention experts also spoke with the Observer about whether buildings like the one that caught on fire should be required to have more exits.

Late last year, the state labor department fined three companies a total of \$56,000 for violations related to the fire. Families of the men who died also sued the developer and others, saying the deaths were preventable.

WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE?

DONE: Johnson said the Charlotte Fire Department learned lessons after the SouthPark fire: the fire spread faster than could

be managed by the incident command system and there was a lack of radio discipline, which meant too many people were speaking rather than listening. Too many firefighters also showed up to the fire and made organization unmanageable the department's report revealed.

Johnson said there needed to be a better selection of water supply, too.

Johnson's recommendations include:

- Implement more command field technicians and conduct more training for the technicians who are responsible for managing communications and aiding firefighters.
- Staff the field communications unit.
- Increase survival training.

The department already sent employees to the National Fire Training Academy for incident command, water supply and mayday training, Johnson said. The department also conducted a field technician pilot program, which he said was a success.

"Let's be proactive instead of reactive, right? We had some very close calls on this particular fire where we could have lost up to four or five firefighters trying to make an

attempt there. As I said, the fire outpaced the incident command system," Johnson said.

- Develop guidelines for dealing with help from other departments.
- Look for ways to technologically enhance fire truck tracking.
- Consider a consolidated dispatch center for the fire department, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department and medics.

The department has made progress toward reaching these goals, Johnson said, and has already hired 12 additional fire inspection employees and compiled a new construction inspection team. Officials also examined software to improve unit tracking.

Johnson said there were "false reports" the fire department was called to inspect the construction site seven days before the fire. The department did not know vertical construction started on the building, he said. The 12 new employees will allow the department to be more involved with pre-permitting discussions, preventing similar oversight in the future.

One notable effort, Johnson said, is the department worked with the National Fire Protection Association and the North Carolina General Assembly to require construction sites have a fire protection program manager tasked with handling safety efforts starting in January.

"I want to assure you all that although we haven't been able to accomplish all the recommendations as of today, that our goal is to meet and implement each one of those recommendations," Johnson said. "(I'm) very proud of the men and women here and the work that they do every day and putting their lives on the line when it's time to do so."

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