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MARK THOMPSON DRONEFOOTAGE PRO

Helene flooded several homes along Lake and Riverside drives. The storm washed sewage, debris and other contaminants into the Catawba River basin as far west as the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Sewage spills add to pollution Helene washed into Catawba River

BY GAVIN OFF
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Heavy rain from Helene caused more than a quarter million gallons of sewage to spill from Mecklenburg County's wastewater treatment system and into the Catawba River basin.

At least that's the official estimate the city gave the N.C. Department of Environmental Quality.

The real amount of waste was likely much bigger, said Rusty Rozzelle, water quality program manager for Charlotte-Mecklenburg Storm Water Services, a partnership between the city and county that oversees drainage and water quality.

The county's drinking water supply is safe. But the environment took a hit, and it will take some weeks to assess the toll, Rozzelle said.

And it is not just what leaked into the

Catawba locally that Charlotte-area residents should be aware of, he said. They'll also have to grapple with any impacts from the debris, sewage and other contamination that washed into the river upstream, as far west as the Appalachian Mountains, that will eventually float to Charlotte.

"This is by far and away the most devastation our waterways have experienced in modern history — both from a water quality and water quantity perspective," Rozzelle said.

When untreated sewage reaches a waterbody, bacteria, viruses, parasites, molds and fungi are released. Wading, swimming or ingesting contaminated water could lead to stomach cramps and diarrhea or even life-threatening ailments such as cholera and hepatitis, according to the Environmental Protection Agency.

Bacterial levels are usually highest immediately after contamination and

when the rivers are running the fastest, said Mike O'Driscoll, a hydrologist and professor at East Carolina University.

The extra water dilutes the pollutants, he said, but some contaminants, such as nutrients and heavy metals, could be in the water for months.

SEWAGE SPILLED MANY PLACES INTO THE RIVER

More than 1 million gallons of sewage leaked from collection systems within the North Carolina portion of the Catawba River basin, The Observer data analysis shows.

Northeast of Charlotte, some 309,000 gallons spilled from the Newton Collection System. Ninety-two thousand gallons spilled across the Catawba River in Gaston County. Sewage flowed into the Catawba River basin upstream from Mecklenburg and at three

SEE SEWAGE, 11A

Music stars band together for hurricane relief show at BofA Stadium

BY THÉODEN JANES
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Three of the biggest music stars North Carolina has ever produced — Luke Combs, Eric Church and James Taylor — will headline a special benefit show for victims of Hurricane Helene on Saturday, Oct. 26 at Bank of America Stadium in Charlotte.

"Concert for Carolina," announced Monday morning, also will feature bluegrass musician Billy Strings, a Michigan native.

In a news release, Live Nation said: "The Tar Heel State is a profoundly special place for all four artists, as it is where Combs, Church and Taylor grew up and first discovered their musical interests, and where Strings has performed many, many times over his career and holds an extra special place in his heart."

SEE BAND, 12A



JOSHUA KOMER The Charlotte Observer

Luke Combs smiles as he takes the stage at Bank of America Stadium on Saturday, July 15, 2023.

Charlotte takes fire prevention steps after SouthPark blaze

BY NORA O'NEILL
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Charlotte Fire Department officials said they have a plan to improve rescues and avoid fires like the SouthPark blaze that killed two workers trapped on an upper floor.

CFD Chief Reginald Johnson on Monday presented an after-action report of the five-alarm SouthPark fire to the Charlotte City Council's Housing, Safety and Community Committee. It detailed what went wrong in May 2023 and what the department needs to do to prevent a similar incident.

The SouthPark fire, which reached 2,000 degrees, occurred at a seven-story, mid-rise building with five stories of wooden construction, no fire suppression systems and no drywall, Johnson said. The building was under construction at the time. As construction across Charlotte shows no signs of slowing down, Johnson said the department is making necessary changes to prevent deadly construction fires.

"That was probably the largest fire in recent history, if not all the history, of the Charlotte Fire Department," he said. "We are not alone. There are a number of construction fires that have gone on for decades... This is the type of construction that's going on all over the city, so it's important that we have this conversation."

Following the presentation, committee members thanked Johnson for his work and brought up concerns about the department, including that it was not properly staffed, it abolished a construction team in 2018, and that a forest fire truck arrived late. Johnson dispelled the concerns, saying the department has a full staff, no construction team was cut and the truck arrived on time.

"We are still in prayer, not only for our residents whose families are facing the loss of their loved ones, but for all of our firefighters, (and) in reality, the trauma that was faced to go into a five-alarm and not have everything that should have been in place," committee vice chair LaWana Mayfield said.

SOUTHPARK FIRE DETAILS

The SouthPark fire occurred at the construction site of what would have been a 239-unit luxury apartment building. Over 200 firefighters responded and rescued 15 people from the fire. It took nearly six hours to get the blaze under control.

Two construction workers, Reuben Holmes and Demonte Sherrill, died in the fire after making a call to their boss saying they were unable to find an exit. The Charlotte Observer reported the pair

SEE FIRE, 11A



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