WEDNESDAY OCTOBER 9 2024

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homes or leach into the

soil, said O'Driscoll of

be two or three weeks

test water along the Ca-

tawba River. There is no

said. Officials know bacte-

need to test it now, he

ria counts are "really

**HELENE POLLUTION** 

weathered much larger

sewage spills than the at

reported to have escaped

Observer analysis of state

Charlotte's largest sew-

age leak happened in 2018

when heavy rains caused

15 million gallons to leak

into Long Creek off Oak-

dale Road, northwest of

uptown, The Observer

found. That same year,

Creek, east of Charlotte

Helene's toll on the river

contamination between

the eastern slopes of the

**Douglas International** 

But what makes

so terrible was all the

Airport.

flowed into Taggard

another 2.6 million gallons

least 236,000 gallons

The Charlotte area has

**EXTENDS BEYOND** 

**LOCAL SPILLS** 

data found.

Rozzelle said it would

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

### FROM PAGE 1A

## **SEWAGE**

Charlotte Water Collection System locations after Helene roared across the Carolinas, state

records show. Mecklenburg County's largest untreated discharge was more than 224,000 gallons into Lake Wylie, with no specific utility facility identified in the data. Another 11,000 gallons flowed into Sugar Creek, which runs through the center of the city, and 1,500 gallons into Campbell Creek, on the city's west side, according to

DEQ estimates. Downstream from Mecklenburg County, Helene caused nearly 500,000 gallons of raw sewage to spill into Rock

Hill, S.C. area waterways. The exact cause of all spills is unclear. When it comes to Charlotte Water, the public utility, floating debris can run into and break wastewater pipes that span creeks. Lift stations, pumping systems that move wastewater from lower elevations to higher ones, can overflow. And erosion can undermine underground pipes, said Cam Cooley, a utility spokesperson.

For those not linked to the utility, an influx of water can cause septic

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 tank waste to back up into boiled it before drinking, she told The Observer. East Carolina University. Her home sits downstream of a number of spills, including the before local officials even 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, during Helene, a Charlotte 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."

Gavin Off: 704-358-6038



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

#### **FROM PAGE 1A**

## **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

#### **WHAT NEEDS TO BE** DONE?

deaths were preventable.

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,

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 ef-

forts 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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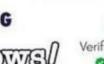


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