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FORT LAUDERDALE NEWS

7 sewage spills in 7 weeks: Fort Lauderdale rushing to stop latest sewage explosion

By Susannah Bryan and Lisa J. Huriash
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Sewage leaking into the storm water system at George English Park is discharging into the Intracoastal waterway on the west side of the park Thursday. (Susan Stocker / South Florida Sun Sentinel)

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FORT LAUDERDALE — It's becoming almost a ritual: A sewer pipe breaks and crews work around the clock to stop the spill, sometimes for days.

After a string of sewer line breaks in December, a [seventh struck on Thursday](#) when an aging 42-inch cast-iron pipe that runs under the Middle River began spewing sewage near George English Park and the Galleria mall.

December's staggering number of breaks resulted in one of South Florida's [biggest sewage spills ever](#): 126.9 million gallons. And that number's about to get higher.

The pipe that broke Thursday was installed in the 1970s and is part of the same line that broke three times in December — [twice in the Rio Vista neighborhood](#) and later in the Himmarshee Canal, Mayor Dean Trantalis said Friday.

“We’re trying to make up for lost time,” he said, referring to the city’s decision years ago to delay pipe maintenance. “This is not the new normal. We apologize that this is happening but we are making our best effort to minimize the impact.”

[[RELATED: Sewage spilling to Middle River after another pipe break in Fort Lauderdale](#)]

Workers toiled overnight to learn what might have caused Thursday’s break. By Friday, they had yet to find it.

“I don’t know if we’re ever going to find the exact cause,” Fort Lauderdale spokeswoman Shannon Vezina said.

The pipe runs under the Middle River near Bayview Drive and Sunrise Boulevard, making repairs more difficult.

On Saturday morning, Vezina provided an update on the repair efforts. The contractor has completed excavation work on the south side of the damaged portion of the pipe, installing a tapping saddle and securing it in place with concrete.

But the bypass line had not yet been put in place.

Crews are excavating around the break to install equipment that will send the sewage into a 32-inch bypass pipe and keep it from flowing into the river. Once that bypass pipe is installed, crews can remove the pipe’s broken section and replace it.

[[RELATED: Sewage spills are a toxic stew just waiting to infect people and pets](#)]

This week was trial by fire for Raj Verma, who started his job as the city’s new public works director on Monday.

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“It’s not a good situation for anybody, but I’m very confident we will get to it,” Verma said of the latest pipe break. “One single line brings the flow from the north to the south end. There’s no way to deflect it somewhere. There is only one single line and it has become a very fragile system. We have what we have.”

In the meantime, Fort Lauderdale has issued precautionary advisories [warning people to avoid swimming](#), fishing, jet-skiing, paddle-boarding, kayaking and canoeing in the Middle River and [surrounding waterways](#). The boundaries of the advisory extend from Northeast 26th Street on the north to Las Olas Boulevard on the south, and from North Victoria Park Road on the west to the Intracoastal Waterway on the east.

George English Lake and the boat ramp at George English Park will remain closed until tests show it’s [safe for people to go back in the water](#).

[Water quality tests](#) are being conducted daily at eight sites, City Manager Chris Lagerbloom said. In addition, crews have installed eight aerators in the Middle River and George English Lake to increase oxygen levels to help control odor.

Bayview Drive remains closed between Sunrise Boulevard and Northeast 11 Court.

For updates, people can call the city’s 24-hour Neighbor Service Center at 954-828-8000.

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