

This is KPTZ 91.9 FM in Port Townsend. And I'm Jim Burke with local news and commentary for Thursday, September 5, 2024.

So now that Labor Day is behind us and the 2620 Road Fire is last week's news already, it's time to talk about the latest on the aging sewer, the sinkhole, and how the city is dealing with raw sewage on Water Street. Tuesday, this reporter mentioned that another section of that sewer main failed last December, but that emergency was actually in December of 2022. Time flies.

What follows is informed by articles from the *PT Leader* and the *Peninsula Daily News*: Just after 12:30am on Saturday, August 31, the city began receiving calls about a potential sinkhole located just a few feet southwest of the Port Townsend-Coupeville ferry terminal on Water Street. The failed pipe is the main sewage line serving downtown Port Townsend, most of Uptown, and Morgan Hill. Problems with this pipe were originally discovered after an extreme tide in December of 2022, when a sinkhole appeared and released sewage into the streets near Gaines and Water Streets. The city found that the asbestos concrete pipe was rotting away due to hydrogen sulfide gas emitted from the sewage.

Steve King, director of Public Works for the City of Port Townsend, said that after the sewer line failed in 2022, the city received a grant to repair it, and the project was scheduled to begin within the next few months. King said, "If it would have held on for another three or four months, we wouldn't have had a problem."

According to King, the city declared an emergency, allowing them to dispatch a contractor quickly. King arrived on the scene around 1:30am, and city workers were already addressing the situation. He said that after digging out the pavement, the poor condition of the sewer pipe made a quick fix impossible. The city called in Seton Construction to assist with the work at daybreak. Seton and city crews worked on attempting to repair and stabilize the situation throughout the day until approximately 1am Sunday. City crews coned off the area from traffic and cut the pavement open, and King said, "As soon as we put a jackhammer on it, it punched through. You could tell it was a big hole under the pavement. This is a sewage force main, which means it comes from pumps, so every time the pumps turn on, a leak would show up. The pumps turned on and we saw sewage show up and we went, 'Oh boy, now we know what we have: a broken sewer pipe.'"

The pumps turn on based on usage, and being late at night, they were only turning on every 15 to 20 minutes, for a moment or so. During the day, they are under much heavier usage, turning on every few minutes. King said it's one of the heaviest-usage pipes in Port Townsend, as it serves all of downtown and uptown. The cavity under the pavement was caused by soil being sucked into the pipe along the break whenever the pump activated, King said. He added that the timing was lucky. If it had happened during busier traffic hours, a heavy vehicle would have been likely to break the pavement and fall into the hole. King said, "We couldn't fix the pipe. The pipe was so rotten...compromised, that we were unable to make a repair." Sewage is being diverted around the break area with gasoline pumps and hose going along the street to the next maintenance hole, where it is fed back into the pipe, King said.

He reported that in spite of the location and the event occurring during a busy weekend, traffic was not heavily impacted. King said, "Ferries did a great job. We talked with Olympia traffic control office at WSDOT, and then we also talked with the local ferries staff, and they kept people off of State Route 20 and kept traffic moving. They've been doing an amazing job, and it's worked out OK, and it's all because of their efforts keeping the ferry traffic off of State Route 20."

In 2022, no sewage was reported to have leaked directly into Port Townsend Bay, but if any sewage reached the bay, the city estimated less than 50 gallons reached the water. This time around, the bypass system was installed before any sewage was able to leak out into the bay, thanks to the quick response of city workers and the crews from Seton Construction. King acknowledged that while the leak came at an inopportune time, the inconvenience now faced will make it more convenient to repair the sewer pipe permanently. More specifically, fixing this small section of pipe now means the city will not have to close off that intersection when the final repairs resume in a few months.

Quoting King again: “I’d like to say, number one, a big hat-tip to our crews and to Seton Construction. We had two excavators working – our crew was on one, and Seton was on the other excavator, and we were just working together. We needed that kind of people power”

In 2023, the Water Street Sewer Replacement Project was funded with \$2.7 million in grants and low-interest loans.

KPTZ 91.9 FM brings you local news Monday through Friday at noon and 5pm and at noon on Saturday. You can contact us at news@kptz.org. I’m Jim Burke. Thanks for listening.