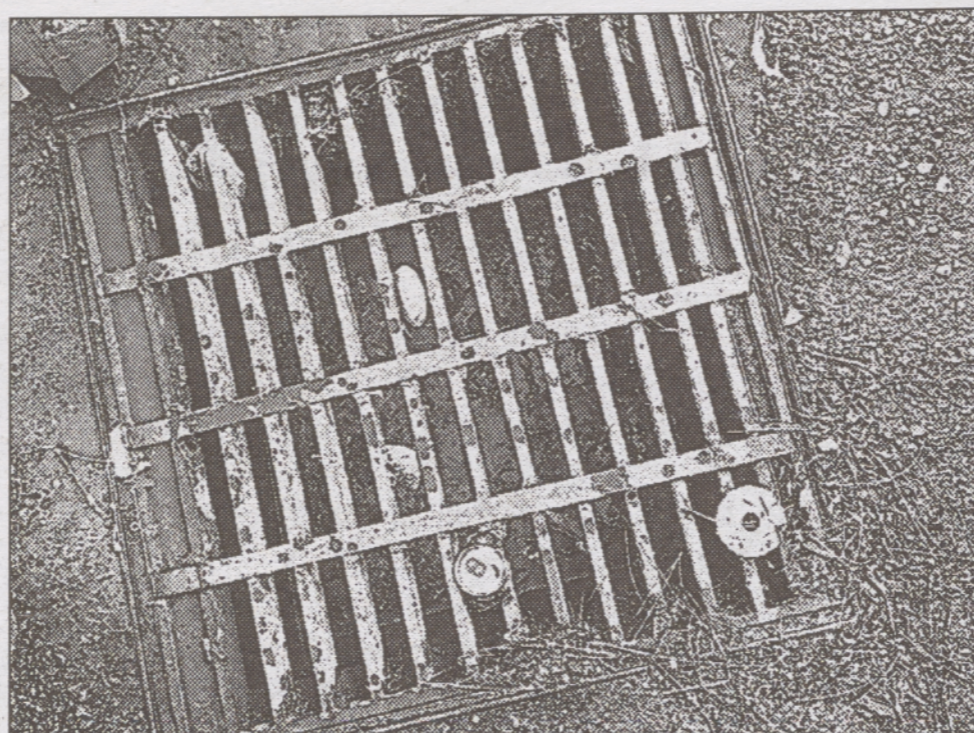


An arrow points to a 2-inch by 24-inch hole cut in the screen leading to the city's sanitary sewer system, a permit violation.



Debris, such as beverage cans, caught in and below a catch screen intended to keep debris out of the city's sanitary sewer.



PHOTOS ARE FROM A PORTLAND BUREAU OF ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES INVESTIGATION

Debris that jammed the pumps at the Rivergate Pump Station.

IN A JAM

The city has evidence Honey Bucket rigged a drain and jammed the sewer, but the porta-potty company blames 'homeless folks'



PHOTO BY EMILY GREEN

BY EMILY GREEN
STAFF WRITER

When the Rivergate Pump Station in North Portland began to jam with clothing, construction materials and hypodermic needles in April, the source of the debris was a mystery.

The underground station takes sewage that's been flowing downward along a gravity-powered path and pumps it upward to higher ground. From there, the sewage continues its journey to the city's wastewater treatment plant to be treated.

When a city sewer pump jams, it can cause raw sewage to back up into homes and businesses, leak out into the street and possibly end up in storm drains that lead to the Willamette River.

Because raw sewage contains some pretty nasty bacteria, such as E. coli, these overflows can spell a public health emergency and an environmental mess.

Of notable concern, the Rivergate Pump Station happens to sit adjacent to nearly 2,000 acres of wildlife habitat in the Smith and Bybee Wetlands Natural Area. It's the largest protected freshwater wetland within an American city.

Depending on the volume and velocity of the spill, an overflow at that location could have potentially flowed into the river or affected wildlife. The habitat is home to many species, including river otters, black-tailed deer, beavers, Western painted turtles, Chinook salmon and 100 types of bird, such as bald eagles and ospreys.

When the Rivergate station jammed nine times over 10 days, officials in Portland's Bureau of Environmental Services knew they had to pinpoint the source of the

problem as soon as possible.

Luckily, each time the main and secondary back-up pump at the station were jammed with debris, triggering an alarm, crews arrived in time to clear the clogs and reinstall the pumps before an overflow occurred.

Any facility with a permit to discharge into the city's sanitary sewer system is required to have safeguards in place to keep large solid materials from entering the system.

For this reason, one theory floated early on in the city's investigation was that someone might be illegally dumping clothing and other garbage directly into the sewer, according to internal city emails.

But a city inspection of the area's manholes yielded no evidence of such dumping.

The focus of the investigation changed when the city discovered a Honey Bucket storage facility on North Rivergate Boulevard, just north of St. Johns, had recently obtained a wastewater permit to begin emptying its porta-potties onsite.

The site's wastewater system had passed inspection in February, and its Industrial Wastewater Discharge Permit from the city had been approved.

The day Honey Bucket began discharging wastewater toward the Rivergate Pump Station, however, was the day the pump began to clog.

"That was the big smoking gun," said Dan Parnell, Bureau of Environmental Services industrial permitting manager.

Over the course of 10 days, the only day the city's sewer pump didn't jam was the only day Honey Bucket didn't discharge

wastewater, according to city documents obtained through a records request.

Debris similar to the items that clogged the city's pump was discovered onsite at Honey Bucket in its catch basins, according to city inspectors. They noted a beverage can and hypodermic needles floating in the company's septic tank. These items had to pass through all the safeguards, which rely mainly on workers' diligence, and a catch screen to arrive at that location, Parnell said.

As it turns out, people discard all sorts of items inside Honey Buckets, which are often used at construction sites, music festivals and other outdoor events. Tom Rogers of Northwest Cascade, Honey Bucket's parent company, told city regulators that workers regularly find everything from beer cans and Gatorade bottles to bras, underwear and other items in Honey Bucket porta-potties.

When employees clean out the toilets, they're supposed to fish out large items and throw them away. Additionally, before the water enters the onsite septic system, it has to pass through a screened drain that should stop any items that were missed by workers.

But city inspectors discovered the Honey Bucket facility manager had cut a 2-inch by 24-inch hole in one of the screens intended to keep debris out of the sewer – a major permit violation. Additionally, a pipe had been replaced to alter the facility's septic flow – another serious violation.

"I've been in this business for 16 years now, and that's the first time I've had a permittee that has drastically altered a

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