

OPINION

Your View: Will Bethlehem finally stand up to the landfill and stop “forever chemicals” from entering the Lehigh River?



Sewage water runs through a “trickling filter” at Bethlehem’s Wastewater Treatment Plant in this file photo. To discharge its leachate into the Bethlehem Wastewater Treatment Plant, Bethlehem Landfill must receive an “indirect discharge” permit from the city. {Harry Fisher / The Morning Call}

By **BREENA HOLLAND** | Lehigh University
June 13, 2023 at 7:30 a.m.

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As a long-term resident of Bethlehem observing recent e...
across the Lehigh River in Lower Saucon Township, I was relieved when a Northampton County judge



Regardless of what happens in court, this battle is far from over.



Breena Holland

Bethlehem now has a unique opportunity to jump into the fray and take action to protect its own residents and neighbors from the filthy discharge — or “leachate”— that the landfill produces.

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Peer-reviewed scientific studies show that exposure to small amounts of PFAS are associated with significant negative health effects such as decreased fertility; developmental delays in children; increased risk of prostate, kidney and testicular cancer; and abnormal hormone function, among others.

In its recent evaluation of data from more than 200 landfills from across the country, the Environmental Protection Agency found PFAS present in the leachate of over 95% of the landfills.

Presently, every month of the year, approximately 70,000 gallons of the Bethlehem Landfill’s leachate gets processed at the Bethlehem Wastewater Treatment Plant before it’s discharged into the Lehigh River. Despite playing this critical role in the landfill’s operations, Bethlehem failed to join nearly every other surrounding municipality (Northampton County, Easton, Bethlehem Township, Hellertown and Freemansburg) and St. Luke’s University Health Network in successfully intervening in the “conditional-use” hearings so they could oppose the landfill expansion.

But Bethlehem’s unique role in processing the landfill’s leachate now offers the city another chance to be an environmental ally by taking action against the expansion.

To discharge its leachate into the Bethlehem Wastewater Treatment Plant, the landfill must receive an “indirect discharge” permit from the city. On June 30, the current discharge permit will expire. The Bethlehem Landfill Co. has already admitted in the Lower Saucon zoning hearings that its proposed expansion would significantly increase the volume of leachate that it sends to the Bethlehem’s water treatment plant.

The impending permit expiration creates a prime opportunity for the city to impose new permit conditions to better protect the Lehigh River and all of its downstream users. For example, Bethlehem could comply with new EPA recommendations and condition issuance of the landfill’s indirect discharge permit on testing for PFAS and other toxic pollutants in the leachate.

These conditions would allow us to determine how much of these pollutants wind up in the Lehigh River by “pass-through” in the treated wastewater dumped into the river.

Given federal efforts to reduce the discharge of these chemicals, it’s not clear why the city is giving the landfill a green light to continue burdening downstream communities that must suffer from the treated landfill leachate that it dumps into the river.

The EPA has already recommended methods for wastewater plants to test and monitor PFAS in indirect discharges and other steps to reduce PFAS discharges to our nation’s waterways. Any new indirect discharge permit issued to the landfill should require PF EPA. This would help determine what additional control

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Like those in many cities around the country, Bethlehem economic and infrastructure challenge. Before the city a producer, it should know what is in the waste it’s process dangerous chemicals that the city’s water treatment plant then the city shouldn’t accept the waste.

The downstream users of the Lehigh River should not be chemicals the landfill won’t remove from its leachate. It this does not happen.



Breena Holland

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