

The Real Poop on DELCORA...

The Delaware County Regional Authority (DELCORA) is the public body that handles much of the sewage in the county. They run the Western Regional Treatment Plant – a sewage treatment plant located on the western end of Chester City. More than half of the county's sewage and stormwater is piped to this facility on Booth St on the Delaware River, where they separate the solids from liquids. Some of the water they separate out is used as cooling water at the Covanta trash incinerator next door. The rest is dumped back into the Delaware River. The sewage sludge (often referred to by the public relations term, "biosolids") is burned in two sewage sludge incinerators at the plant.

There are five main issues with DELCORA that area residents are concerned about:



Incinerator Air Pollution

DELCORA is one of Chester City's largest air polluters. Covanta's trash incinerator is the worst of them, but the much smaller sewage sludge incinerator at DELCORA causes them to rank as the city's second or third largest air polluter. They release ammonia, benzene, hydrochloric acid, mercury, nitrogen oxides, particulate matter, sulfur dioxide, volatile organic compounds, and much more. These pollutants contribute to asthma attacks, heart attacks, cancers, and a variety of other diseases.

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Digesters not pyrolysis!

DELCORA is exploring the idea of replacing the incinerators with an experimental type of incinerator called pyrolysis. This is still polluting and the technology is expensive and typically breaks down a lot and does not work.

It would be far healthier for residents if DELCORA would stop burning sewage sludge and use anaerobic digestion as similar facilities do. Digestion is like composting without oxygen in a big tank. It destroys some of the pathogens in sewage that can spread disease, and reduces the volume so it can be landfilled. Many places dump this sewage sludge on farm fields, but it's too toxic for that purpose. Digesters produce methane gas that can be burned for energy and is far safer to burn than burning the sludge itself.

Odors

It's a sewage treatment plant. They all stink. However, there are major parts of the facility that are open to the air and are closer to residents and can't simply be relocated. These can be covered and odor control systems can be installed. In response to concerns we and CRCQL raised in 2021, DELCORA is pursuing odor controls.

Trucked-In Waste

DELCORA has been accepting industrial waste for decades, including from big polluters like the Kimberly-Clark paper mill and the Sunoco oil refinery in Marcus Hook. When that oil refinery closed in 2012, DELCORA lost a huge customer and got permission from the PA Department of Environmental Protection to start trucking in industrial waste from all over the region. They now accept well over 200 million gallons of industrial waste per year, with about 4,000 trucks per month in and out of the plant.

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No fracking waste, PFAS, & landfill leachate!

DELCORA has verbally committed to not taking fracking waste, landfill leachate from landfills that accept fracking waste, or PFAS (the unburnable “forever chemicals” that are in firefighting foam and numerous products). However, about 16% of the industrial waste DELCORA accepts by truck is landfill leachate, which is the most toxic liquid industrial waste, and contains PFAS and toxic metals. They accept some leachate from the Delaware County Solid Waste Authority’s landfill which still accepts the toxic incinerator ash from Covanta. DELCORA should stop accepting landfill leachate, especially from landfills that take in incinerator ash. There’s no guarantee that DELCORA’s promises will stick if Aqua is successful at taking them over.

The Tunnel

Except for the more rural areas, most of the county is covered by DELCORA’s sewer system. All of the Western Service Area goes to DELCORA’s plant in Chester. So does 30% of the Eastern Service Area that covers much of the eastern half of Delco. The remaining 70% of the Eastern Service Area (ESA) is piped to Philadelphia’s sewage treatment plant in Southwest Philly.

Philadelphia Water Department is required to do huge upgrades and wants DELCORA to cover some off the costs if continuing to use the Philly plant. This would cost about \$882 million. Building a new sewage treatment plant would be over \$614 million. Building a 100-foot-deep tunnel to their Chester plant would be about \$470 million. This is driving the choice to build the tunnel that would largely run under Rte 291.

The tunnel would have extra capacity to store stormwater when it rains so that they don’t have to let raw sewage dump into the Delaware River at several “combined sewer overflow” areas such as the one where people fish at the end of Highland Avenue. Building the tunnel would take four years and is projected to be completed by 2028. Rock would have to be excavated from five points where the surface would be disturbed. The two in Chester would be at either end of the

city – one at DELCORA’s plant, and the other on the border of Eddystone at Ridley Creek and 291. About 40 trucks a day would haul rock away. The deep tunnel boring machine would pass any given house in about one day.

If the tunnel is built, DELCORA will have to turn away much of the trucked-in waste to make room for another 50% of the sewage from the Eastern Service Area; 20% would still go to Philly.

Privatization (Sale to Aqua)

Aqua is trying to privatize both the water system (Chester Water Authority) and the wastewater system (DELCORA). Chester Water Authority would be a hostile takeover (the CWA board has been opposed to it all along), but DELCORA’s board, while still dominated by Republican appointees, cut a deal to sell the system to Aqua.

Privatizing an essential utility means that the service needs to be provided *and* they have to make a profit for shareholders. Aqua is famous for jacking up people’s utility bills once they take over a system. Privatizing DELCORA would also mean that decision-making is no longer in open public meetings, and that Pennsylvania’s Right to Know Law will no longer apply to them.

Since early 2022, Delaware County Council has appointed a majority of the DELCORA board members, and the county and current DELCORA board members are doing all they can to stop the privatization. There are multiple lawsuits and a Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission proceeding that must be resolved before the sale of DELCORA to Aqua can be completed.

Aqua has sent out a mailer to residents throughout Delaware County designed to confuse people. It pretends that the merger has anything to do with the tunnel project (which would proceed regardless) and argues that Delaware County Council is costing residents more by fighting the Aqua takeover. In fact, the expense of fighting the takeover is tiny compared to the increased costs residents would face if Aqua succeeded. See the county council’s excellent response to the mailer at: www.tinyurl.com/delcoraaqua.