2006

How Clean Is Portland Harbor?

Lance Tapley

Portland Monthly Magazine

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.usm.maine.edu/cbep-publications

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Casco Bay Estuary Partnership (CBEP) at USM Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Publications by an authorized administrator of USM Digital Commons. For more information, please contact jessica.c.hovey@maine.edu.
With the beach closures in the Gulf of Maine last summer, just...

How Clean Is Portland Harbor?

By Lance Tapley
It’s an old story. People have been talking about cleaning up Portland Harbor for years,” begins a Maine Sunday Telegram feature story in 1968, written by a fresh-out-of-college waterfront reporter by the name of Lance Tapley.

The story refers to “scores” of oil spills in 1967 and to an article written in 1929–found in the newspaper’s library—that describes an oil slick polluting the harbor. The 1968 story relates efforts by the Coast Guard and a recently founded group called the Portland Harbor Pollution Abatement Committee to move beyond just talking about cleaning up the harbor.

A Portland sewer treatment system, the story notes, was “a long way off.” In 1968, all the city’s human wastes poured unchecked into the harbor, Back Cove, and several streams.

Skip forward almost 40 years to the present: The city’s plant on Munjoy Hill has been treating sewage since 1978, as has South Portland’s Waterman Drive plant. Despite 400-plus tanker visits to the port each year, oil spills are now rare. Even a huge one in 1996, when the Julie N tore into the old Million Dollar Bridge, was contained and cleaned up well enough (at a cost of $40 million) so that no ecological disaster occurred.

Artwork in this story is available as posters from the California Coastal Commission, a public education program in San Francisco whose mission is to protect, conserve, restore, and enhance environmental and human-based resources of the California coast and ocean for environmentally sustainable and prudent use by current and future generations. It was established by voter initiative in 1972 and later made permanent by the Legislature through adoption of the California Coastal Act of 1976. The Coastal Act includes specific policies that address issues such as shoreline public access and recreation, lower cost visitor accommodations, terrestrial and marine habitat protection, visual resources, landform alteration, agricultural lands, commercial fisheries, industrial uses, water quality, offshore oil and gas development, transportation, development design, power plants, ports, and public works. For more information, visit www.coastal.ca.gov
Retro Ice

The pure cool white of diamonds melts into the pure cool white of platinum; melts into summer’s warmth of yellow gold. Little waves of gold gather, swirling at the base of diamonds. Diamond light streams from center to side. Diamond light shimmers icy blue-white… quite simply… a delight.

Retro Ice is a refinement of a classic Cross design from the 50’s and 60’s. Your grandmother probably had one. Larger round center diamond, eight graduated small round diamonds. Retro Ice is a combination wedding-engagement ring in a low-profile, comfortable design. This combination simplifies life. This combination melts into summer’s warmth of yellow gold.

Retro Ice is a refinement of a classic Cross design from the 50’s and 60’s. Your grandmother probably had one. Larger round center diamond, eight graduated small round diamonds. Retro Ice is a combination wedding-engagement ring in a low-profile, comfortable design. This combination simplifies life. This combination melts into summer’s warmth of yellow gold.

Diamond light shimmers icy blue-white… quite simply… a delight.

Manufacturing Jewelers Since 1925
570 Congress St., Portland, Maine 04101
1-800-433-2988

Cross Jewelers

Tri-Center Round Diamond
5/8 carat total weight, 14K yellow gold and platinum $4,285.00

All platinum $3,685.00 actual size

The Secret Storm

Considerable progress, though, has been made. In 1996, about two billion gallons of untreated sewage went into the harbor and nearby waters from Portland, South Portland, Cape Elizabeth, and Westbrook, according to the state Department of Environmental Protection (DEP). In 2004, an estimated 600,000,000 gallons overflowed—a 70 percent drop.

The Secret Storm

Considerable progress, though, has been made. In 1996, about two billion gallons of untreated sewage went into the harbor and nearby waters from Portland, South Portland, Cape Elizabeth, and Westbrook, according to the state Department of Environmental Protection (DEP). In 2004, an estimated 600,000,000 gallons overflowed—a 70 percent drop.

But think of swimming in those 600,000,000 gallons! And in the outfall pipes feed water from everyday rain into the harbor and bay, they sweep along pesticides, herbicides, gasoline, motor oil, pet waste, and other toxic effluvia of modern life.

The Secret Storm

Considerable progress, though, has been made. In 1996, about two billion gallons of untreated sewage went into the harbor and nearby waters from Portland, South Portland, Cape Elizabeth, and Westbrook, according to the state Department of Environmental Protection (DEP). In 2004, an estimated 600,000,000 gallons overflowed—a 70 percent drop.

The Secret Storm

Considerable progress, though, has been made. In 1996, about two billion gallons of untreated sewage went into the harbor and nearby waters from Portland, South Portland, Cape Elizabeth, and Westbrook, according to the state Department of Environmental Protection (DEP). In 2004, an estimated 600,000,000 gallons overflowed—a 70 percent drop.

But think of swimming in those 600,000,000 gallons! And in the outfall pipes feed water from everyday rain into the harbor and bay, they sweep along pesticides, herbicides, gasoline, motor oil, pet waste, and other toxic effluvia of modern life.

The major source of pollution of the harbor has been the same, and it’s storm water runoff,” says the harbor’s chief watchdog, Joe Payne, a 58-year-old bearded biologist whose job as “baykeeper” is to investi...
In 1998, the Friends of Casco Bay rescued 33,000 lobsters from the inner harbor, which was being dredged, paying lobstermen to trap and then release them out in the bay. Cohen says: “They are double what people believe there are other threats to the harbor—“oil is still a fairly significant risk,” given how much goes through the port, much of it for a pipeline to Montreal. But she agrees with Payne that the sewage overflow during storms and the normal runoff through the sewers together create the biggest unresolved pollution problem for Portland Harbor and Casco Bay. Her group produces “State of the Bay” and other reports that can be read at www.cascobayestuary.org.

Portland’s mayor, James Cohen, describes the city’s remaining “combined sewer overflows”–CSOs in public works lingo–as “one of the larger environmental challenges.” Cohen, 41, an attorney, has a family connection to the port’s cleanup: His mother, Jacki Cohen, is chairwoman of the Casco Bay Estuary Partnership’s board.

Portland’s sewer cleanup deal with Portland, “but let’s agree with Payne that the sewage overflows is an unfunded mandate. Calling it this, he says, implies the city has the right to pollute. Although Cohen has a green reputation and has created a “Sustainable Portland” task force that Littell, 39, a Portland resident, sits on, the mayor seems resigned to the long timeline for the remaining sewer reconstruction. He doesn’t suggest any massive infusion of city funds. “We are financially struggling,” he says of the city. Littell bristles a little at Cohen’s suggestion that cleaning up the sewer outflows is an unfunded mandate. Calling it this, he says, implies the city has the right to pollute.

The state’s DEP commissioner, David Littell, says he’s willing to renegotiate the sewer cleanup deal with Portland, “but let’s keep good, solid, consistent progress.”

Portland, however, is at the mercy of the harbor’s condition, which is discussed below. Cohen sees the city’s remaining “combined sewer overflows”–CSOs in public works lingo–as “one of the larger environmental challenges.” Cohen, 41, an attorney, has a family connection to the port’s cleanup: His mother, Jacki Cohen, is chairwoman of the Casco Bay Estuary Partnership’s board.

The mayor calls the Clean Water Act’s commandment to municipalities to clean up their sewer systems “the largest unfunded federal mandate out there.” For Portland alone, he estimates, $75 million still will have to be spent to meet the requirements of an agreement the city originally made with the DEP in the early 1990s, but that has been revised twice since. Expectations now are that the work won’t be finished until around 2018; the city is seeking further revisions to its agreement because the feds have a new mandate: The city must prevent the most toxic storm water—even after all sewage has been removed—from flowing untreated to harbor and bay.

Unfunded Mandate?

These projects have so far been entirely financed by municipal sewer charges. This is the reason city sewer rates are high, Cohen says: “They are double what people pay for water.”

Whose Harbor Is Cleanest?

Industrial wastes, livestock, and untreated sewage estimated in harbors, in gallons, per year:

- Puget Sound (Seattle city limits only): 964,982
- Boston Harbor (Boston city limits only): 7.8 million
- San Francisco Bay (Oakland, San Francisco city limits only): 96 million
- Portland Harbor: 600 million
- New York Harbor (Metro NYC limits only): 1.04 billion

Figures courtesy Environmental Protection Agency.

And the city gets “not a dime,” he says, from federal or state agencies for this sizeable effort.

The state’s DEP commissioner, David Littell, says he’s willing to renegotiate the sewer cleanup deal with Portland, “but let’s keep good, solid, consistent progress.”

Littell bristles a little at Cohen’s suggestion that cleaning up the sewer outflows is an unfunded mandate. Calling it this, he says, implies the city has the right to pollute. Although Cohen has a green reputation and has created a “Sustainable Portland” task force that Littell, 39, a Portland resident, sits on, the mayor seems resigned to the long timeline for the remaining sewer reconstruction. He doesn’t suggest any massive infusion of city funds. “We are financially struggling,” he says of the city. Littell comments that he sees no reason Portland couldn’t put up some city tax money to move the process along.

“Government is reactive,” Joe Payne observes, not too optimistically. “It reactives to citizen pressure.” Nevertheless, “Portland is in better shape than most of the harbors south of us,” Payne says—not sounding, for a change, like the critic he is paid to be. “Almost everything is moving in the right direction.”

Forty years after the founding of the Portland Harbor Pollution Abatement Committee, the harbor has come a long way in pollution abatement, although it’ll take at least another dozen years to get to a really grand environmental destination.

So the old story continues, but for a long time now it has been more than talk.