



NANCY LANE / HERALD STAFF FILE

NEW RULES: The Merrimack River supplies drinking water to Lawrence.

Baker signs bill forcing alerts of sewage dumps

By **MEGHAN OTTOLINI**

Wastewater treatment plants along Massachusetts rivers will have to notify the public when they dump untreated sewage into the water during heavy rain events, thanks to a bill signed into law by Gov. Charlie Baker this week.

“This legislation has been in the making for about a decade. It’s been a long battle for transparency about this public health issue,” said Director of the Merrimack River Watershed Council Matthew Thorne.

The Herald investigated wastewater treatment plants’ combined sewer overflows in 2018, uncover-

ing data that revealed 2.8 billion gallons of wastewater pouring into rivers and waterways in the Bay State each year. In 2016, Lowell alone dumped 118 million gallons of sewage-laden wastewater into the Merrimack River.

The 117-mile river provides drinking water to more than 600,000 people in Lowell, Lawrence, Methuen and Tewksbury. It’s also popular for boating and recreational activities.

Outdated infrastructure is to blame: heavy storms overwhelm the capacity of antique pipe systems and send wastewater — including raw sewage — overflowing into the river.

The bill, championed by state Sen. Pat Jehlen, D-Somerville, requires sewage plants to alert the public within two hours of an overflow occurrence, the location where it occurred, affected areas and precautions people in the area should take. During rainy periods, overflows can last for days — in those cases, sewage plants will have to update the public every eight hours with details on the event.

According to the MRWC, on one day in 2020, sewage plants in Lowell and Lawrence discharged a combined 70 million gallons of untreated wastewater into the river. That overflow



LOWELL SUN FILE

IN IT FOR THE LONG HAUL: State Sen. Edward Kennedy, with state Sen. Diana DiZoglio and Dougan Sherwood, Greater Haverhill Chamber of Commerce president, take to the Merrimack River in 2019 to raise awareness for a bill signed into law by Gov. Charlie Baker this week that requires wastewater treatment plants to notify the public when they dump untreated sewage into the water during heavy rain events.

occurred Sept. 10, over just 2 1/2 hours. The wastewater plant in Haverhill has still not reported its discharge from that date, leaving the public guessing that the total amount of sewage in the river was even higher.

Thorne said getting the bill in front of the governor during the pandemic was a challenge, but not unrelated to the prolonged COVID-19

crisis, as wastewater has proven to hold samples of the virus.

“Something like this bill can be put on the back burner, but this issue is not disconnected. Having clean water is an essential service and basic human right,” he said.

“The passage of this legislation marks an important step in our efforts to restore

and protect our rivers and beaches across Massachusetts so that they may be here for future generations to explore and enjoy,” said state Sen. Diana DiZoglio, D-Essex, who kayaked the river in 2019 to raise awareness for the bill.

The ultimate goal is to attract aid from Washington to fix the region’s infrastructure, Thorne said.