

Jones asks Minister to release number of sewage bypasses

By Bill Rea

Dufferin-Caledon MPP Sylvia Jones wants to know how many sewer bypasses there have been so far in 2017.

She put the question to Environment Minister Chris Ballard in Question Period in the legislature last Thursday, but she didn't get a direct answer

Sewage bypasses occur when flow exceeds the capacity of the treatment plant, normally due to storms. This means that raw sewage is released into connected waterways.

Jones has introduced a private members bill that would require the Ministry of Environment to publish within 24 hours cases of sewage bypasses into waterways.

In putting the question, Jones pointed to the excessive rainfall that has taken place this year.

"Many communities have experienced flooding, and our municipal sewer systems were often overwhelmed," she said, according to Hansard. "As you know, when these heavy rains occur, municipalities are often forced to initiate a bypass at their sewage treatment plants, releasing partially treated sewage into our local waterways."

She also pointed out that municipalities were forced to bypass more than 6.5 billion litres of partially treated sewage in 2016, and she wondered what the figure was for this year.

"I know we have worked extensively with municipalities across Ontario to address bypass concerns," Ballard replied. "We're committed to helping municipalities upgrade their infrastructure to separate storm and waste sewage to minimize the sewage discharges."

But he also pointed out waste water treatment plants are owned by municipalities, not the Province.

"The ministry does monitor bypass incidents to confirm that these municipalities have contingency plans to address any discharges at their facilities," he commented. "We're going to continue to work with these municipalities to make sure that they minimize the number of discharges."

"This information highlights the importance of my proposed legislation, Bill 141: The Sewage Bypass Reporting Act, 2017, which will require the Ministry of Environment to publish when and how much sewage is bypassed so that the public can be aware of potential health risks when using local waterways," Jones said later.

"Currently, there is no requirement for public reporting when a bypass occurs, despite municipalities already reporting to the Ministry when they are forced to bypass," she added. "The Ministry won't share with Ontarians when partially treated sewage is in their local waterways."

She added her bill has been getting support from municipalities and conservations authorities all over the province. Peel Regional council passed a motion of support earlier this month.