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Audit of City's Sewers Finds Safety Concerns

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An audit by the city of Berkeley presented last month found its sewer management falling short of safety and environmental standards.

The audit, which was brought to the city council meeting Oct. 13 by the Auditor's Office-, reported that the city's sewer management has a high percentage of sewer spills and is lacking in safety precautions.

The audit offered numerous recommendations, including unannounced inspections and establishing written safety procedures, to improve management, all of which were approved by Berkeley City Manager Phil Kamlarz.

"It'll save the city money, but more importantly, it will save the bay," said Ann-Marie Hogan, Berkeley City Auditor.

According to the audit, Berkeley's spill rate in 2008 exceeded most wastewater service providers that participated in the 2006 survey by the American Water Works Association.

In July, the Environmental Protection Agency issued a draft court order against the East Bay Municipal Utility District addressing storm-generated water flow into the sewage treatment system in Berkeley, among other cities.

In a daily operation observed by auditors, a backhoe machine was used for excavation before the gas and utility lines were uncovered. Damages to those lines could have caused injuries and death to the sewer workers, resulting in city liability for utility repairs and a civil penalty up to \$50,000.

In addition, the mismanagement of the sewer system could sully the city's reputation, said Councilmember Gordon Wozniak.

"It doesn't look good for Berkeley since we're supposed to be a green city," Wozniak said. "We have to take a step back and realize we screwed up and do better. The sewer report was a wake up call."

Tags: Public Works Department

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