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the city wastewater to all state and federal standards.”

Added Gooch, “Other cities in North Georgia that currently accept this wastewater are Ellijay and Jasper; The Water Authority does not transport their product.”

Enumerating the concerns of the Lake Nottely Improvement Association, or LNIA, alongside complaints of inaction by local leaders, Lively said Thursday he believed Paris could be doing more to

inform people of the “negative leachate water processing.”

Particularly, LNIA is worried about manmade chemicals called perfluoroalkyl substances, or PFAS, known to be in leachate.

In Georgia, these chemicals are currently unregulated in treated water of any kind, though the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is in the process of evaluating nationwide regulations for two such

substances specifically in drinking water.

“PFAS are found in a wide range of consumer products that people use daily such as cookware, pizza boxes and stain repellants,” per EPA.gov. “Most people have been exposed to PFAS. Certain PFAS can accumulate and stay in the human body for long periods of time.

“There is evidence that exposure to PFAS can lead to adverse health outcomes in humans. The most-studied PFAS chemicals are PFOA and PFOS. Studies indicate that PFOA and PFOS can cause reproductive and developmental, liver and kidney, and immunological effects in laboratory animals. Both chemicals have caused tumors in animals.

“The most consistent findings are increased cholesterol levels among exposed populations, with more limited findings related to low infant birth weights, effects on the immune system, cancer (for PFOA), and thyroid hormone disruption (for PFOS).”

The EPA has issued drinking water health advisories regarding PFOA and PFOS, which are no longer manufactured in the U.S. but are still produced internationally

and imported via consumer goods like “carpet, leather and apparel, textiles, paper and packaging, coatings, rubber and plastics.”

Lively said that, at LNIA’s request in January, Georgia EPD conducted water sampling to test for PFAS at many sites along Butternut Creek, in Lake Nottely, and at the wastewater treatment facility, including the hauled-in leachate.

The EPD sent the samples to the EPA for processing, resulting in the finding of multiple types of PFAS in the leachate as expected, since the water being treated comes from a landfill containing manmade garbage.

Sampling also showed greatly reduced levels of PFAS in water treated and released as effluent into Butternut Creek where the wastewater facility is located.

Comparing the treated wastewater levels of the two PFAS singled out by the EPA with recommended health advisory levels for drinking water, one sample of effluent showed levels of PFOS and PFOA below the combined advisory limit of 70 parts per trillion, while a duplicate sample contained levels slightly above the limit.

Importantly, the “non-enforceable and non-regulatory” EPA health advisories for drinking water do not apply to treated wastewater, as effluent is not classified as drinking water, and the EPA currently has no recommendations whatsoever for PFAS in treated wastewater and elsewhere.

“These health advisories only apply to exposure scenarios involving drinking water,” per EPA.gov. “They are not appropriate for use in identifying risk levels for ingestion of food sources, including fish, meat produced from livestock that consumes contaminated water, or crops irrigated with contaminated water.

“The health advisories are based on exposure from drinking water ingestion, not from skin contact or breathing.”

It does not appear that the EPA is concerned presently about PFAS in the wild or in treated wastewater, which would likely be present anyway to some extent absent leachate, as domestic wastewater is known to contain unregulated chemicals as well.

Should the EPA later choose to regulate PFAS in treated wastewater, however, the Georgia EPD would be responsible for enforcing such regulations, at which point the Blairsville wastewater plant would need to treat its water in such a way as to reduce PFAS to specific levels.

It should be noted that individual states seem to be able to regulate PFAS levels, as at least eight states have adopted enforceable limits in drinking water, and other states have made proposals to do so, though Georgia is not among them, according to saferstates.com.

Concerning whether or not he believed the state should regulate PFAS in drinking water, Sen. Gooch said “that’s a decision for regulators to determine based on sound scientific data that has not been determined anywhere in the U.S. to my knowledge.”

As it stands, PFAS concentrations appeared to be below detectable limits in the samples containing treated wastewater collected directly downstream of the facility in Meeks Park in January, with mirrored results in samples from Lake Nottely, which is fed by the Nottely River into which Butternut Creek flows.

Furthermore, none of the samples from the Surface Water Treatment Facility operated by the Notla Water Authority showed any signs of PFAS, including raw water from the lake and finished drinking water serving thousands of county residents.

At LakeNottely.org, LNIA has noted that it makes sense PFAS were not detected in the Notla Water System, as “Notla draws its water near the dam at the far end of the lake.”

“We focus on the permanent nature of the contaminants and their concentration because of the small size of the lake inlets and our concern of Meeks Park being located just downstream from the (city of Blairsville Wastewater Treatment Plant),” per the website.

Essentially, LNIA is worried about the leachate causing a buildup of currently unregulated PFAS in the water system and eventually the people it serves, even at the current low levels, which they believe could significantly impact local health outcomes as the long-lasting chemicals

compound over time.

Blairsville Mayor Jim Conley said the city follows all state and federal treatment guidelines and regulations to the letter. He contends that the treated water released by the wastewater facility is cleaner than the creek into which it flows, and that there is zero cause for concern over water quality.

Moreover, Plant Supervisor Cook said that, “with the processing of leachate, there will be additional testing required by EPA to be done annually for priority pollutants.” Neither PFOS nor PFOA are on the list of priority pollutants, though they may be one day.

According to the city, the plant has treated “approximately 3,680,440 gallons of leachate and has approximately 98,000 gallons in a holding tank waiting to be treated,” for which The Water Authority has paid the city \$188,922.

Conley said the city would be using the money to upgrade both the water and wastewater treatment plants in years ahead, and to assist with \$2.5 million in water/sewer relocation project costs for the upcoming Georgia Department of Transportation expansion of SR 515.

Lively also expressed concerns in the July 16 meeting over the high levels of E. coli present in Butternut Creek samples collected in Meeks Park and tested by MountainTrue, formerly the Hiwassee River Watershed Coalition.

Further, he said MountainTrue’s testing efforts were insufficient, consisting of “indirect studies to measure water quality, which does not measure anything specific, and certainly not PFAS, plasticizers, the four families of triazines that form pesticides/herbicides, toxic compounds, etc.”

A representative of MountainTrue could not be reached by press time for comment to discuss the E. coli levels, their potential root causes, and local testing conducted by the organization.

Continuing, Lively said LNIA is asking the county to share a plan for “stopping the addition of the leachate, developing a protocol for testing the quality of lake water,” and to provide an “information site to keep citizens apprised of lake status.”

Lively went on to say LNIA was appealing primarily to Commissioner Paris because its members did not live inside city limits, so held little sway with Blairsville City Hall, and they felt Sen. Gooch presented an apparent conflict of interest given his private company’s arrangement with the city.

“Cities often sell their services to citizens and businesses,” Gooch said, addressing the conflict of interest claim, “such as companies who pump septic tanks from homes have to pay cities and counties to treat their septic tank waste.

“We pay market rates to the cities we use for this service. They can shut us off at any time they choose. The city does not pay for our service; instead, we are the paying customer in this situation. Any other business or individual could engage in a similar business with the city.”

Gooch has been involved in The Water Authority since its inception in 2010, the year before he swore into office as a state senator. In his capacity as a legislator, Gooch has been instrumental in securing state funding for many local initiatives, including the Blairsville Municipal Airport.

Professionally, he’s also been a licensed wastewater treatment plant operator for almost 30 years.

“I have learned a lot about the importance of environmental protection from my formal training and work experience,” Gooch said. “I would never harm our community. This treatment process is the environmentally safe way to treat this runoff.”

L a k e N o t t e l y . o r g recognizes State Rep. Matt Gurtler as having helped LNIA obtain a reply from the EPD that led to the sampling in January, but Lively said the group has had little response from other quarters, including the Commissioner’s Office.

In answer, Paris referenced a two-page letter he’d sent to one LNIA member, and he stated that, ultimately, he felt it was LNIA’s job to make its case to the powers that be at the federal and state levels, as he had no control over city business, which was being conducted in full compliance with the law.

Furthermore, he said he had no reason to doubt local water quality based on information from his

trusted sources, including Mayor Conley and the city of Blairsville, Callie Moore of MountainTrue and the Environmental Protection Division.

The commissioner made sure to say he had no doubt the group members’ hearts were in the right place, and he ended discussion on the topic by agreeing to reach out to EPD and EPA officials to share LNIA’s concerns.

OTHER BUSINESS

Also in the meeting, Paris welcomed Clay Pilgrim of Rushton Certified Public Accountants, who held the county’s Audit Report Presentation for the fiscal year that ended Dec. 31, 2019.

Pilgrim reported a clean audit, which reflected a \$1.6 million increase in net position over 2018 due to “increases in property taxes and sales taxes with much lower increase in expenses.” This increase resulted in Paris amending the FY19 budget by roughly \$1.4 million in Thursday’s meeting.

In other business, Paris appointed Katy Jones to the Department of Family and Children Services Advisory Board, and Rhonda Colwell and Jordan Rogers to the Union County Library Board of Trustees.

He also accepted a \$295,908 agreement with the Department of Corrections for six detainee work crews to help with county lawncare, trash and building projects through June 30, 2021. Each work detail is \$49,318, and the county will not have to pay for details canceled due to COVID-19.

Paris accepted an agreement with the Department of Transportation for \$129,722 in grant monies for the Union County Transit System over the next year. The amount “contains supplemental funding provided through the CARES Act.”

The commissioner accepted another agreement for indigent defense services via the Public Defender Office of the Enotah Judicial Circuit, with a cost of \$112,425.82 to Union County between now and June 30, 2021.

“There is an additional cost of \$20,000 contained in this agreement for an additional public defender to work additional hours in Union County,” Paris said.

He then announced an amendment in the agreement between the county and its design firm for the expansion of the View Grill dining area at the Community Center in the amount of \$6,300.

Continuing, Paris approved a \$33,184 contract to cover the county’s portion of salaries in the Union County Extension Office.

In his Commissioner’s Comments, he related that “the nearly five months of COVID have been the most difficult time in my 20 years of being a commissioner.”

“Almost every day, it’s another decision that must be made, and almost all the decisions related to COVID do not have any precedent to go by, so it seems that every decision is a new decision,” Paris said.

Paris pointed out that, due to COVID-19, the Union County Courthouse is currently under a judicial order requiring guests to wear face masks, practice social distancing and submit to temperature checks before entering the building.

The commissioner said he would continue “to recommend, like the governor, that you wear a mask whenever you are in the public.”

“It really takes the pressure off of employees at grocery stores, Walmart, Home Depot and other businesses when you wear your mask in,” Paris said. “We’re finding that more and more people in the community are starting to test positive.”

“It’s not to an epidemic state yet, but it’s enough that we’re all concerned about it. We had somebody at the courthouse this week that tested positive. There’s been several others that are around, and there seems to be more of that going around.

“We’re hoping that this trend that we’re seeing nationally, and especially in the Southeast, doesn’t come up and bite Union County. But we are concerned – we just have a general sense and feeling that things are getting worse, and we’re trying to do all we can to see that that doesn’t proceed.”

Walmart announced July 15 that it would “require all shoppers to wear a face covering starting Monday, July 20.” CVS and Walgreens also began requiring facial coverings Monday, and Home Depot will require that customers wear masks starting July 22.