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SUNDAY, JUNE 25, 2017

BREAKING NEWS AT CHICAGOTRIBUNE.COM

THE TAX DIVIDE

Tribune findings lead to scrutiny

Cook officials agree to let outside party look into assessments system

Following a Tribune investigation that exposed a pattern of unfair and inaccurate assessments, the Cook County assessor's office is coming under increased scrutiny.

Now, the Tribune has learned that the county's inspector general is inquiring about issues raised in that series, "The Tax Divide." And County President Toni Preckwinkle says she and Assessor Joseph Berrios have agreed to an evaluation of the current property tax system by an outside party.

Among the problems the Tribune found was that inaccurate assessments harmed the poor while benefiting the rich; the assessor also did not fully implement a new valuation method that he had touted as an improvement.

Read the full story on Page 4

Pastry chef rises above tough start

Born into long odds on South Side, he found way with guiding hands



REX W. HUPPKE

The kitchen is clean. Almost spotless.

It's well-stocked, and there's an order to everything. Mixing bowls here. Measuring cups there.

A digital scale to weigh out ingredients.

The recipes — for pastries and cakes, tarts and frosting — demand precision. Focus.

And Darrius Thomas is in control. Of all of it.

It wasn't always like that for him. There were too many moments of chaos. Too much messiness. There was uncertainty — about where he might sleep, about where his next meal might come from — and a lack of control.

So the kitchen became his sanctuary. It was the place where everything made sense, where he could rise above his station and create something beautiful, some-

Turn to Chef, Page 14

Upcoming soda tax counts by the ounce

What you need to know about Cook County's new beverage fee

BY GREG TROTTER | Chicago Tribune

That 2-liter of pop you're picking up for the Fourth of July picnic might pack a little sticker shock this year as Cook County rolls out a new penny-per-ounce tax on a wide variety of sugar- and artificially sweetened beverages.

As one example, a 2-liter bottle, which usually costs about \$1, will incur a 67-cent soda tax.

The county's sweetened beverage tax, which takes effect July 1, is

one of many so-called soda taxes popping up across the country as elected officials seize upon the opportunity to raise revenue while attempting to improve public health. Conditions such as obesity, diabetes and heart disease are linked to consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages, though the science on artificially sweetened beverages is less conclusive.

This policy trend has pit public health experts and local leaders against the beverage industry and small-business owners.

Find out what you need to know on Page 11



CHRIS SWEDA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Women on the Recovery on Water team lift a shell out of the water after a practice on the South Branch of the Chicago River in early June.

Bacteria-filled water still flushed into Chicago River

In 2016, sewage and runoff flowed into long-abused waterway once every 6 days

BY MICHAEL HAWTHORNE

Chicago Tribune

The thunderstorms that swept across the city on a sultry July evening last year weren't unusual for a typical Chicago summer.

But rain still quickly saturated the city's aging sewers, draining off streets, parking lots and rooftops into an underground labyrinth that also carries sewage from households and factories. Within minutes, the noxious blend of liquid waste began flushing out of more than three dozen overflow pipes that empty into the Chicago

HOW MUCH SEWAGE?

The amount discharged by each overflow pipe changes from year to year.

90.7 billion gallons

The discharge in 2010, the largest amount this decade.

2.4 billion gallons

The discharge in 2012, the driest year in Chicago since 2005.

River, the long-abused waterway Mayor Rahm Emanuel promotes as a showcase for urban revitalization.

During the next 29 hours, more than 2.6 billion gallons of bacteria-laden sewage and runoff poured into the river, enough to cover the Loop in murky water 8 feet deep.

By now, treating the river as a dumping ground for Chicago's waste was supposed to be a rare mishap. Instead, a new Tribune analysis found, sewage and runoff flowed into the waterway about once every six days

Turn to River, Page 16



Tom Skilling's forecast High 71 Low 52

Chicago Weather Center: Complete forecast in Nation & World, Page 41

\$3.99 city and suburbs, \$4.99 elsewhere 170th year No. 176 © Chicago Tribune



<p>www.ButeraMarket.com</p> <p>COUPON LU# 520</p> <p>Gallon 1%, 2% or Skim Country Delight Milk</p> <p>99¢ Limit 1</p> <p>Limit 1 Offer with coupon & separate \$10.00 or larger non-coupon purchase. Valid 6/24/2017 thru 6/27/2017. Coupon Not Available in Store.</p>	<p>COUPON LU# 521</p> <p>8 oz. Pkg. Excludes Extra Sharp Cheddar</p> <p>Food Club Chunk Cheese</p> <p>99¢ Limit 2</p> <p>Limit 1 Offer with coupon & separate \$10.00 or larger non-coupon purchase. Valid 6/24/2017 thru 6/27/2017. Coupon Not Available in Store.</p>	<p>COUPON LU# 522</p> <p>Dozen Large Eggs</p> <p>29¢ Limit 1</p> <p>Limit 1 Offer with coupon & separate \$10.00 or larger non-coupon purchase. Valid 6/24/2017 thru 6/27/2017. Coupon Not Available in Store.</p>	<p>COUPON LU# 523</p> <p>4 oz. Pkg. Supreme Choice Perch or Pollock Fillets</p> <p>10¢ Ea. Limit 4</p> <p>Limit 1 Offer with coupon & separate \$10.00 or larger non-coupon purchase. Valid 6/24/2017 thru 6/27/2017. Coupon Not Available in Store.</p>	<p>COUPON LU# 524</p> <p>8 ct. Piggly Wiggly Hot Dog or Hamburger Buns</p> <p>69¢ Limit 2</p> <p>Limit 1 Offer with coupon & separate \$10.00 or larger non-coupon purchase. Valid 6/24/2017 thru 6/27/2017. Coupon Not Available in Store.</p>	<p>COUPON LU# 525</p> <p>16 oz. Sugardale Bacon</p> <p>1.99 Limit 1</p> <p>Limit 1 Offer with coupon & separate \$10.00 or larger non-coupon purchase. Valid 6/24/2017 thru 6/27/2017. Coupon Not Available in Store.</p>
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Bacteria surge in river after storms

River, from Page 1

last year, and even more frequently during the May-to-October recreation season.

While the July 23 storm was the messiest to hit the river last year, at least 1 billion gallons of wastewater surged into the waterway on five other days during 2016, reports submitted to the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency show. The average amount dumped into the river during and after rainstorms: 318 million gallons.

The chronic sewage overflows are a major reason the amount of disease-causing bacteria in the river remains staggeringly high, despite years of efforts to improve water quality. Monthly testing reveals routine violations of water quality standards in stretches of the waterway that federal and state officials have declared should be clean enough to prevent kayakers, rowing teams and boaters from suffering diarrhea and other gastric ailments.

“There literally is crap in the water after it rains,” said Kathleen Behner, of Lakeview, a longtime member of Recovery on Water, a group of breast cancer survivors that trains for rowing competitions on the South Branch in Bridgeport. “The first time I saw it, I thought it can’t be true. We should know better than that by now, right?”

With Emanuel encouraging people to see the river as an extension of Chicago’s parks, environmental groups are urging Gov. Bruce Rauner’s administration to crack down on the sewage overflows. They also want the Illinois EPA to order regular, easy-to-find updates about potential health threats, similar to the color-coded flags raised at Lake Michigan beaches when bacteria levels are high.

Signs posted along the river warn that the fetid water flowing out of combined sewer overflow pipes during and after storms “may contain bacteria that can cause illness.” But the details are buried in jargon-heavy government reports.

The amount discharged by each overflow pipe changes from year to year, the Tribune found, depending largely on when and where it rains and how fast a storm hits the city. Annual totals so far this decade ranged from 90.7 billion gallons in 2010, a particularly wet year, to 2.4 billion gallons in 2012, the driest year in Chicago since 2005.

More than 18.2 billion gallons of pollution flowed into the river last year, with fewer than a dozen of the 123 pipes responsible for the vast majority of that amount.

One of the filthiest spots was across the North Branch from a boathouse Emanuel commissioned six years ago from architect Jeanne Gang as a cornerstone of his riverfront plans.

A single pipe, at Roscoe Street behind Lane Tech high school, flushed more than 3.9 billion gallons of sewage-laden runoff into a stretch of the river where high school and college rowing teams practice almost every day.

Another pipe six blocks downstream at Diversey Avenue discharged 844 million gallons last year. Pollution flowed so frequently into the North Branch that levels of fecal coliform bacteria — an indicator of other pathogens in human and animal waste — exceeded state standards during three of the five months when water samples were collected at Diversey last summer.

The river is considerably dirtier after sewage overflows from the North Side reach downtown.

Along the newly extended Riverwalk at Wells Street, fecal coliform levels spiked last June at 23,000 colony-forming units per 100 milliliters of water — 115 times higher than state standard of 200 CFUs. Bacteria levels never dipped below 1,100 CFUs at Wells last summer, records show.

“My guess is most people flocking to the Riverwalk aren’t aware of the intestinal miasma just a few feet away from them,” said



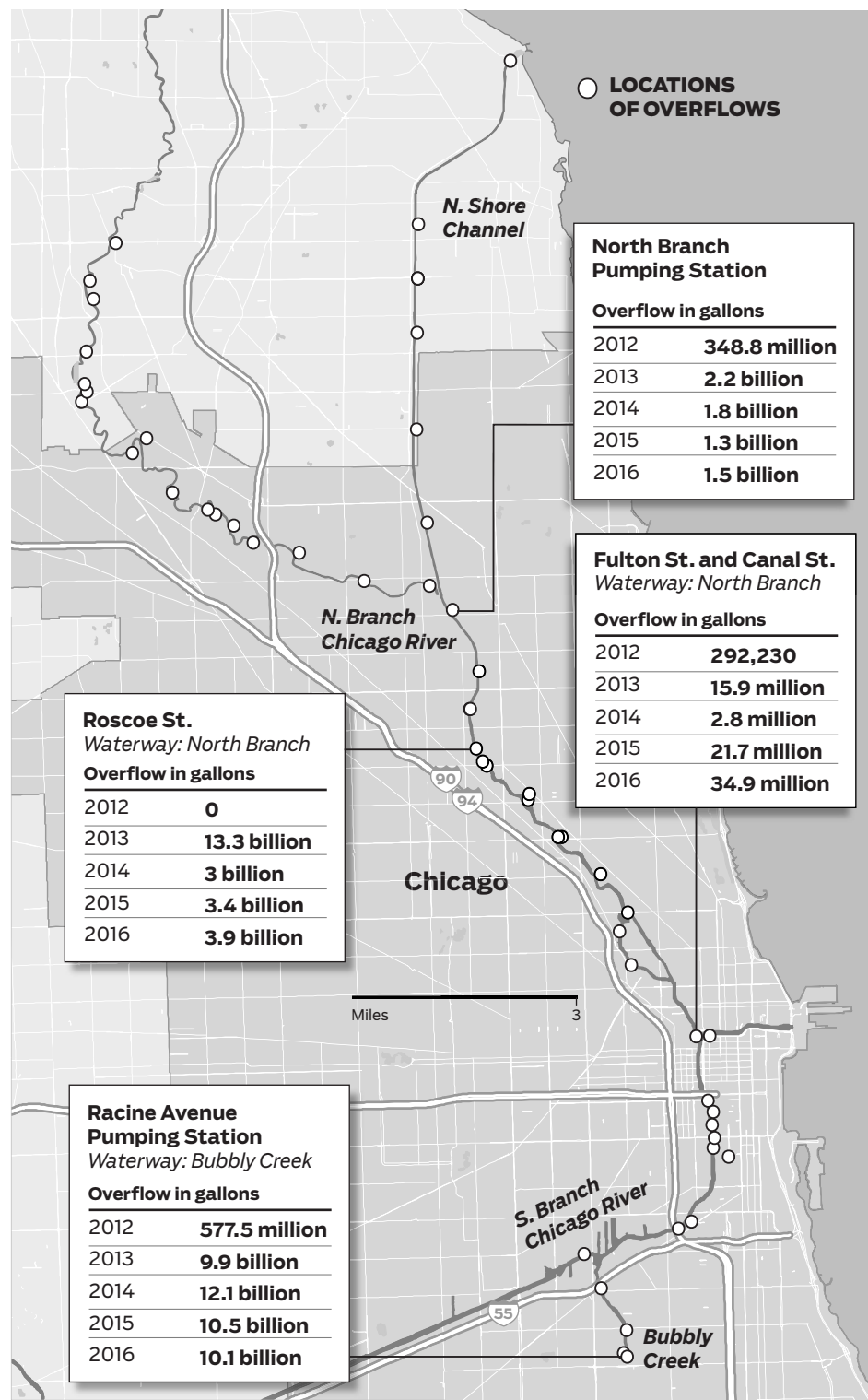
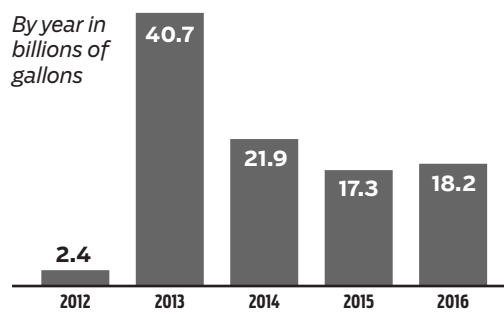
TERRENCE ANTONIO JAMES/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Openings in a building along Bubbly Creek discharge billions of gallons of raw sewage and storm runoff every year.

Discharges into Chicago River system

Chicago’s sewers, which carry both household waste and storm runoff, were designed to drain into the Chicago River when rainfall fills the system to capacity. A total of 123 overflow pipes allow a mixture of untreated sewage and rainwater to pour directly into the river, driving up bacteria levels in the water. The amount discharged varies from pipe to pipe and from year to year, depending on weather conditions.

SEWAGE OVERFLOWS INTO THE CHICAGO RIVER



SOURCE: Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago

CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Henry Henderson, who served as Chicago’s first environment commissioner and now is Midwest director of the nonprofit Natural Resources Defense Council. “Nobody thinks we are going to fix this problem overnight, but we at least need a plan.”

City officials have known for at least a decade that just two-thirds of an inch of rain

can trigger sewage overflows into the river. If more than an inch and a half falls during a short period of time, locks and gates separating the river from Lake Michigan need to be opened and runoff teeming with untreated waste flows into the source of drinking water for 7 million people in the city and suburbs.

Emanuel has vowed to

protect the lake and river by overhauling Chicago’s infrastructure. “Lake Michigan is our Yellowstone. (The river) is our Grand Canyon. We have to treat it with the same type of respect,” he said in March during an Urban Waterways Forum featuring the mayors of Paris, Milan and Lahore, Pakistan.

Yet beyond the mayor’s

2014 announcement of a few pilot projects tied to his “green stormwater strategy,” the city has been slow to adopt new street designs and other neighborhood-level initiatives that allow runoff to seep into the ground rather than overwhelm aging storm drains.

Environmental groups petitioned the state two years ago to lock city leaders into more comprehensive plans when the Illinois EPA renews an out-of-date permit for Chicago’s sewage overflows. The city still has not responded to the request or to other public comments sent to the state agency, dragging out a bureaucratic process that already had been delayed for years.

“I can tell you we are looking very closely at projects the city has in the pipeline and asking questions about whether they are doing enough to address these ongoing issues,” said Alec Messina, the Illinois EPA director. “There also is going to be more notification to the public about real-time impacts.”

In a statement, the Chicago Department of Water Management said it has helped address the problem by installing 108 miles of new sewers since 2012. The department said it is working with other agencies “to provide the best solutions for our residents, the region and the environment.”

Like other older cities, Chicago designed its sewer system during the early part of the last century to drain toward the closest waterway when neighborhood sewers are filled to capacity and threaten to flood basements. The city traditionally has relied on another government agency to address sewage overflows, largely with big-ticket construction projects like the Deep Tunnel, a network of massive storm sewers and cavernous flood-control reservoirs that has been under construction since the mid-1970s. Built by the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District, which operates independently from city government in Chicago and Cook County, the nearly \$4 billion project isn’t scheduled to be completed until 2029.

When district officials initially sought money from Congress, they promised that tunnels 9 to 35 feet in diameter deep below city streets would “bottle up rainstorms” and eliminate sewage overflows into the river and Lake Michigan. Yet contaminated runoff has continued pouring into the river and lake.

The system’s shortcomings are highlighted by a facility near Racine Avenue and Pershing Road that pumps sewage from the South Side to a treatment plant in southwest suburban Stickney. On 46 days last year, the district couldn’t handle surges of runoff and waste and released a total of more than 10 billion gallons into Bubbly Creek, a fork of the river once used as a dump for the now-defunct Union Stock Yards.

Gases from decaying livestock hides still occasionally bubble up from the creek bed. But sewage overflows are the main reason water quality remains poor in a channel that meets the river’s South Branch near another Studio Gang-designed boathouse used by Behner and her fellow breast cancer survivors.

In May 2016, fecal coliform levels in Bubbly Creek shot up to 280,000 CFUs three days after the district released more than 1 billion gallons of sewage into the water, records show.

District and city officials say there should be only a handful of sewage overflows from the Racine Avenue station and other district-owned pipes once a partially completed reservoir in southwest suburban McCook is connected to stormwater tunnels later this year. The former quarry is designed to hold waste and runoff from communities as far away as Wilmette until it can be pumped to the Stickney treatment plant.

“Every taxpayer in Chicago and Cook County is paying a lot of money to solve this problem,” said David St. Pierre, the district’s executive director. “You’ve got to give (Deep Tunnel) a chance to work.”

St. Pierre noted that a separate reservoir near south suburban Thornton helped reduce overflows in the smaller Calumet River region during 2016, its first year in service. The district also has upgraded two of its treatment plants to disinfect wastewater before it is discharged into portions of area waterways used for recreation.

But in documents filed in federal court, district, state and federal officials have acknowledged that the massive public works project won’t fully address sewage overflows into the Chicago River. Questions also remain about whether a system designed more than four decades ago can handle intense, fast-moving storms hitting the region more often as the climate changes.

Under pressure to take more aggressive action, city and district officials are slowly embracing smaller-scale, neighborhood-focused projects designed to soak up or divert water. They just want their efforts to remain voluntary, rather than legally required.

In the low-lying Chatham neighborhood on the South Side, the nonprofit Center for Neighborhood Technology is working with city and district officials to keep water out of the sewers by directing downspouts away from homes, sealing foundation cracks and installing rain gardens and other landscaping improvements to absorb runoff.

“Remember that Chicago was built on a swamp and the natural landscape acted like a sponge,” said Scott Bernstein the group’s co-founder. “It’s getting warmer and it’s getting wetter and we keep paving over everything, so that sponge can’t do its job. Instead all of that water ends up in your basement or your street or the river.”

St. Pierre agreed that expanding the initiatives across the county could end up making a big difference. But the ideas are still fairly radical at an agency that once mocked what is known today as green infrastructure.

“People want relief today,” said St. Pierre. “For the fraction of the cost to install more sewers or bigger tunnels, we could keep the load from backing up into houses or going to the river. That helps everybody.”