

Ann Arbor launches water transparency initiative, Michigan residents call for similar statewide implementation

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Starting in late 2018, Ann Arbor residents have grown increasingly **concerned** about dioxane and **PFAS** contamination in Washtenaw County’s drinking water. With Ann Arbor residents calling for a more transparent reporting system, Ann Arbor Water Treatment Manager Brian Steglitz released a plan to publish updated water quality newsletters every month.

Because May is “Water Awareness Month,” Steglitz published the initial issue of “A2H20” on the first of the month. To further inform residents about water quality, city officials also added a page to their **website** with the monthly report, information about fire hydrant flushing and water rate changes.

In the report, Steglitz mentioned dioxane and PFAS infiltration are not a new phenomenon.

“Dealing with water contaminants is not new to us,” Steglitz wrote. “Throughout my tenure of almost 22 years, and in the decades preceding, the city has successfully addressed and overcome several water quality challenges.”

In an email to The Daily, Daniel Brown, Huron River Watershed Council planner, referenced the ongoing water crisis in Flint. Now more than ever, he suggested, there is a need for transparency regarding the current

state of Ann Arbor's water.

“Post-Flint, it is clear utilities need to be proactive in providing customers with as much information as possible,” Brown wrote. “PFAS and 1,4 dioxane contamination concerns add to the urgency of that messaging in Ann Arbor specifically.”

Breeches in 1,4 dioxane — classified by the [EPA](#) as a likely carcinogen — have been an ongoing problem in Ann Arbor for over a decade. In a [2001](#) press release, Sue McCormick, former Ann Arbor Water Utility director, said the city found trace amounts of dioxane in the water supply during a routine test. Now, according to the first newsletter published by Steglitz, dioxane is at .029 parts per trillion (ppt), which is considered undetected.

Last [summer](#) the Department of Environmental Quality found traces of PFAS around the state, including in the Huron River. Even at low levels, consumption of PFAS chemicals can lead to a multitude of [health problems](#) such as a higher risk of cancer, a weakened immune system and child growth impairments. Since 2016, PFAS levels in Ann Arbor's water have continued to [rise](#).

There are [36 confirmed PFAS sites](#) in Michigan, according to the Michigan Environmental Council. However, the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality believes there could be over 11,300 locations statewide could be contaminated.

Since then, Gov. Gretchen Whitmer has [proposed](#) a PFAS water drinking standard to be implemented by July 1, 2019. U.S. Rep. Debbie Dingell, D-Ann Arbor, echoed [support](#) for Whitmer's proposal, calling again for the Environmental Protection Agency to set a national maximum contaminant level for all PFAS compounds and distribute funds to all contaminated sites.

According to [MLive](#), there was a significant spike in PFAS levels in Ann Arbor's water this past March reaching up to 41.7 ppt.

However, Lisa Wondrash, Ann Arbor communications director, said she wouldn't consider these past three months' PFAS levels — which were all around 4 ppt — to be a spike as the water drinking quality goal is set at 10 ppt.

“PFAS levels in the drinking water will fluctuate depending on how much is present in the Huron River, but the City continues to meet its water quality goals which are well below the EPA Health Advisory Levels,” Wondrash wrote in an email to The Daily.

Brown said the city has added new filtration technology and changed their procedures to reduce PFAS levels, which he said have been effective but costly. Brown affirmed HRWC will continue to work with the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes Energy and the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services to identify sources of PFAS contamination in the Huron River.

“It is far more efficient to stop a source of pollution to the river than it is to treat drinking water after it’s withdrawn from the river,” Brown said. “That requires looking at the entire watershed as a system and prioritizing efforts across many jurisdictions. To help make that happen, HRWC has been advocating alongside other environmental groups for policy changes that protect residents.”

In addition, Wondrash said one way the city is learning to better treat drinking water is by partnering with experts at the University such as Civil and Environmental Engineering professor Lutgarde Raskin. Wondrash added the city will begin a project this summer with North Carolina State University professor Detlef Knappe on alternative ways to treat short-chain PFAS.

However, Michigan residents still remain concerned over the levels of PFAS found in the state’s water.

Ann Arbor resident Dick Chase said he believes Ann Arbor’s water system is one of the best in the state. Yet, he said there is still more to learn.

“I’m interested in the PFAS issues ... I mean the more transparency the better I suppose,” Chase said. “I mean, I think the Ann Arbor water system is one of the better ones. (The newsletter) is going to read issues about PFAS and potentially for dioxane just as well. The people need to know what’s happening.”

According to Plymouth resident Carol Learned, it is the state’s responsibility to be transparent about water quality and hopes other cities enact similar policies.

“I want clean water,” Learned said. “I don’t like dying ... (the state) let it happen and they should bear responsibility for letting it happen. Every community that sells water should be transparent about what’s in the water. If I’m getting my water for free, you don’t have any obligation to make sure it’s clean, but if I have to buy it, it better be clean.”

As potential risks continue to infiltrate Ann Arbor’s water and concerns from residents continue to rise, Brown assured the city will remain vigilant in finding new ways to keep the drinking water safe.

“New threats constantly emerge and keeping drinking water safe is an ongoing challenge,” Brown said. “HRWC will be working with state officials and municipal governments across the watershed to keep our

waters as clean as possible. A clean, healthy watershed reduces risks to all residents by relieving individual efforts by communities to safeguard their own drinking water sources.”

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