

Matthew Price

Testimony for Baltimore City Council October 5, 2022

Thank you, members of the Council, for allowing me to testify today. My name is Matthew Price, and I am a student at Towson University. I have been an intern at Blue Water Baltimore for the past few months and in that short time I have learned a great deal about the sewage issues in our city. Today, I would like to share with you a few findings and demonstrate to the Council why expansion of the Expedited Reimbursement Program (ERP) and the Sewage Onsite Support (SOS) program is not only important to the growth of our city, but also necessary for the health and well-being of some of our most vulnerable residents.

Maryland is fortunate enough to have the highest median household income in the nation, at \$87,063 in 2020. Unfortunately, not all of Maryland shares in this wealth. Baltimore City's median household income is \$52,164. And many neighborhoods in the northwest of Baltimore have household incomes much lower than this. For example, the neighborhood of Grove Park's median household income was just \$29,000 in 2015. Grove Park and nearby neighborhoods in the northwest of the city like West Arlington, East Arlington, and Gwynn Oak are some of the worst affected by the ongoing issue of sewage backups. In April 2022 alone, Northwest Baltimore reported about 98 of the 418 reported across the city for that month. Grove Park and West Arlington had 14 reported that month. Other neighborhoods in the Northwest like Gwynn Oak and Pimlico have staggering amounts that lead this statistic to about 98. As damage cost claims for sewer related backups average at \$5971.80 and many applicants exceed this number, this is a devastating blow for many residents of Grove Park, West Arlington and other neighborhoods. Though DPW, the Health department and the City strongly advise residents to seek professional help to clean up the backups, many residents are forced to clean up sewage

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backups themselves simply because they cannot afford professional services. These incidents therefore leave them at extreme risk of exposure to diseases such as cholera and hepatitis A.

At the heart of this issue is that SOS and ERP's eligibility criteria is far too narrow, specifically the requirement that residents can only qualify for these programs if their backup occurred in connection with a wet weather event. Examining any quarterly report by DPW shows that the vast majority of backups are in dry weather, instantly eliminating any chance of reimbursement or direct cleanup and by extension, any hope that these programs can be effective. SOS and ERP must be expanded to dry weather events to protect public and environmental health and to improve the living circumstances of lower-income residents. Many residents most affected by backups are already far below the median household income of the city and state and cannot risk the financial burden of backup-related expenses with no chance of reimbursement or cleanup support, no chance of justice. ERP and SOS expansion could mean fewer families in debt, less property damage, fewer homes being foreclosed on, and a lower chance of residents getting sick. The expansion of these programs would quite literally save lives. It is a human rights issue.

A former landlord testified about the sewage backups problem at a hearing in November 2019. She spoke about how she had abandoned her investments in the city simply due to the sewage situation and basement backups. The less effectively Baltimore deals with sewage issues, the more people such as this landlord will avoid investing in this city, and the more residents' financial situations will be strained. This is not the path any of us want Baltimore to be on, but it is the reality under the narrow criteria for the ERP and SOS programs. SOS and ERP must be expanded to include dry weather events. Thank you for your time, Council members.