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Kriseman replaces two St. Petersburg wastewater officials as Rick Scott orders investigation



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As Gov. Rick Scott ordered the Florida Department of Environmental Protection to investigate St. Petersburg's sewage crisis Wednesday, Mayor Rick Kriseman announced he was replacing two top city wastewater officials.

Water Resources director Steve Leavitt and engineering director Tom Gibson have been placed on unpaid leave. Both are longtime city employees who were intimately involved in the closure of the Albert Whitted plant, the expansion of the city's Southwest plant and have been at the forefront of addressing the city's growing sewage mess.

Gibson signed the task order for a 2014 consultant study that warned about sewage problems if the Albert Whitted plant was closed. Leavitt has run wastewater operations for more than four years.

The personnel moves came as Scott ordered the DEP investigation, which itself followed U.S. Rep. David Jolly's call for a federal environmental inquiry.

Scott also directed the state Department of Health to conduct additional testing of Tampa Bay beaches and water. The state has already issued one health advisory warning for Simmons Park Beach, across the bay from St. Petersburg.

"Florida is known for our pristine environment, world-class beaches and award-winning state parks," Scott said in a statement. "We must do all we can to protect our environment."

Scott thanked Republican state lawmakers who have been vocal about the issue, including state Sens. Jack Latvala and Jeff Brandes and Rep. Kathleen Peters.

Late Wednesday, U.S. Sen. Marco Rubio also entered the political fray, writing a letter to EPA director Mary McCarthy asking for her agency to investigate if the city's leadership "turned a blind eye towards the inevitability of a sewage spill."

Kriseman said the governor's actions were politically motivated.

"The Department of Environmental Protection is already involved in this issue, and given that the governor is singling out St. Petersburg and ignoring the actions of governments across our region, we have to chalk this up to politics," read a statement from his office.

Scott's office replied that DEP reviews all sewage spills and is doing so in Largo and Clearwater. The agency will work with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and the Health Department to determine the environmental damage and any wrongdoing, according to DEP spokeswoman Shannon Herbon.

"The facts, including the magnitude and frequency of the spills in St. Petersburg, have warranted a special investigation," wrote Scott spokeswoman Lauren Schenone in a statement.

Kriseman is a Democrat. Scott is a Republican. So is Jolly, who has asked for federal action after recent whistleblower reports indicated that the city could have at least partly avoided the massive spills while also calling into question the transparency of the mayor's response to the crisis.

Jolly told the *Tampa Bay Times* late Tuesday that he would ask the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to investigate who is culpable and the damage caused by the city's 151 million gallons of dumps and spills after Hurricane Hermine.

Jolly said he was concerned about reports from Craven Askew, a chief plant operator at the city's Northeast plant, indicating top officials knew shutting the Albert Whitted plant last year could lead to sewage overflows. Askew also contradicted Kriseman's claim that a 58 million-gallon spill in west St. Petersburg was clean, treated sewage. Askew said tests indicated periods of high turbidity or cloudiness, which city officials in the past have said is a sign of pollution. There were also periods of low chlorine, used to kill harmful bacteria. Kriseman on Tuesday stood by his position that residents didn't need to be warned other than posting some signs.

On Wednesday, Jolly released a video explaining his decision. He also urged any city worker with knowledge about the sewage problems to come forward and seek legal whistleblower status.

U.S. Rep. Kathy Castor, D-Tampa, has also asked the EPA to see how it can help. Castor said an administrator in Atlanta assured her the agency was reviewing the facts and considering what assistance it could provide.

The EPA didn't respond to requests for comment.

Meanwhile, an environmental watchdog group questioned the testing done by the city. The Gulf Restoration Network's senior policy director, Matt Rota, said his group's analysis of city testing concluded it had stopped too early, citing one site near the Northwest plant in west St. Petersburg where testing had stopped after only one sample below state thresholds was taken.

"The bay deserves more than the minimum," Rota wrote.

John Palenchar, who replaced Leavitt, had been the city's environmental compliance manager and oversaw the city's recent testing of the sewage spills.

"It's a pretty good analysis of our situation," Palenchar said, but he said the environmental group is using different standards than the city. The city relies on fecal coliform in freshwaters instead of newer bacteria indicators. The city's tests meet the state's Healthy Beaches standard for marine waters, Palenchar said.

Many testing sites are canals and retention ponds and so are always impaired because of stormwater runoff, he said.

Brejesh Prayman, a senior city engineer, will take over for Gibson.

The high-profile housecleaning at City Hall contradicts what Kriseman told reporters on Tuesday when he said an independent firm would handle the investigation into the city's sewage crisis.

"I don't want to taint it," the mayor told the *Tampa Bay Times*.

But the mayor changed his mind after talking to Gibson and Leavitt on Wednesday, his spokesman Ben Kirby said.

Leavitt, 66, joined the city in 1999 and took over as head of Water Resources in 2012. He made \$128,279. Gibson, 59, joined the city in 1987 and became engineering director in 2005. He made \$146,260.

Late Wednesday, Askew again notified city officials of evidence that a 2014 consultant study warning of possible sewage woes if the Albert Whitted plant was shuttered should have been noticed by top officials.

A comprehensive 2016 study of the city's sewers by other consultants used the 2014 study in its analysis. The newest study was written about by the *Tampa Bay Times* and presented at City Council meetings after staff presentations this spring.

Kriseman's office issued a statement shortly after Askew's email become public record, stating that he doesn't doubt the study has been cited and referenced publicly many times, but that neither he nor council members "seemingly knew about it or could use the information to further debate the Albert Whitted plant being closed. And that's why people will be held accountable."

Times staff writer Mark Puente contributed to this report.

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