

December 17, 2019

The Honorable House Speaker Robert DeLeo  
24 Beacon Street, Room 356  
Boston, MA, 02133

The Honorable House Ways and Means Chair Aaron Michlewitz  
24 Beacon Street, Room 243  
Boston, MA, 02133

To the Honorable Speaker and Chair:

We, the 144 undersigned mayors, city councilors, select board members, city and town managers and administrators, conservation commission members, and city and town committee chairs, ask that you support H.3976, *An Act promoting awareness of sewage pollution in public waters*, and ask for its immediate discharge from House Ways and Means to the House floor with a favorable report.

Every year in Massachusetts, nearly 3 billion gallons of untreated or partially treated sewage is discharged into Massachusetts rivers through combined sewer overflows (CSOs), an infrastructure “shortcut” that contributes significantly to water pollution in our state. Sewage carries pathogens - bacteria, parasites and viruses - as well as chemical toxins. These pathogens can cause infections, dysentery, and potentially even cholera.

For high risk populations - children, the elderly, pregnant women - engagement with sewage-contaminated water can be disastrous. A 2004 EPA estimate concluded that between 1.8 and 3.5 million Americans become sick annually from recreational contact with sewage-contaminated waters. A 2015 study of Massachusetts hospital admissions published in a journal of the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences found that ER visits due to gastrointestinal illnesses for elderly patients typically increase by 32% in affected communities after extreme rain events.

The EPA recommends that the public stay away from water contaminated with sewage for 72 hours, and yet we do not provide Massachusetts residents with the information they need to take this simple safety precaution. There is currently no general public notification requirement for operators of these CSOs. As climate change increases the frequency and intensity of storm events in Massachusetts that exacerbate sewage overflows (both combined sewer overflows and sanitary sewer overflows), and as the Commonwealth’s urban population centers continue to grow, we anticipate that the number and impact of sewage overflow events will only grow.

H. 3976 will address the lack of public information about sewage spills and will make public waterways safer. This legislation mirrors requirements in place in 14 other states, requiring general public notifications after sewage spills, so citizens can make informed decisions about when it is safe to recreate in public waterways. Similar common-sense notification requirements have already been adopted in more than a dozen other states. Massachusetts citizens should have the same access to public health information as residents of these other states. We ask that you

support this legislation and efforts to increase funding for communities to implement notification systems and further infrastructure improvements to curtail sewage spills.

On behalf of the citizens we represent and in the interest of protecting the health of all peoples of the Commonwealth, we ask that you act to support the immediate discharge of H.3976 from House Ways and Means.

Sincerely,

Sheryl Becker  
Conservation Commission Member  
Agawam

Adam Dash  
Select Board Vice Chair  
Belmont

Ken Gray  
Mayor  
Amesbury

Roy Epstein  
Select Board Member  
Belmont

Brian Yellen  
Water Supply Protection Committee  
Member  
Amherst

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Board of Selectmen, Member  
Bolton

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Select Board Chair  
Andover

Jonathan Keep  
Board of Selectmen, Member  
Bolton

Daniel Koh  
Select Board Member  
Andover

Stanley Wysocki  
Board of Selectmen, Chair  
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Select Board Member  
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City Councilor, District One  
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Sustainability Committee Chair  
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City Councilor At-Large  
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Diane Mortensen  
Board of Health, Chairman  
Ashland

Michael F. Flaherty  
Boston City Councilor At-Large  
Boston

Thomas Caputo  
Select Board Chair  
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Boston City Councilor, District 8  
Boston

Michelle Wu  
City Councilor At-Large  
Boston

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Ward 5 City Councilor  
Brockton

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Select Board Member  
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City Councilor  
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Craig Kelley  
City Councilor  
Cambridge

Quinton Zondervan  
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Haverhill

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Medford

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Newton

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Town Administrator  
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City Councilor Ward 3  
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Wakefield

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Watertown

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City Council Vice President and District C  
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Watertown

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Richard Parker  
Select Board Member  
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Select Board Member  
Winchester

Amy Shapiro  
Select Board Member  
Winchester

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Select Board Member  
Winchester

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Town Councilor  
Winthrop

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Town Councilor at Large  
Winthrop

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