Legislation Text

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Authorizing the Committee on Commerce and Economic Development to hold public hearings to examine what the Philadelphia Water Department is or could be doing to take advantage of new and existing federal water quality infrastructure funding to address chronic sewage overflows in overburdened communities and improve the water quality of the Delaware and Schuylkill Rivers for public recreational use.

WHREAS, The hearing will include review of a report requested of the Philadelphia Water Department that outlines the Department's plans to (1) identify infrastructure projects that will reduce bacterial contamination, improve water quality, reduce flooding, provide sustainable jobs, and support community health in areas where existing or potential recreational use of the River is occurring or could occur; and (2) obtain federal or state funding to support the implementation of these actions; and

WHEREAS, The Delaware River is one of Philadelphia's--and the nation's--greatest natural resources and rivers; and

WHEREAS, Philadelphians from all parts of the city and all walks of life value the river for its incredible recreational opportunities, scenic beauty and ecological value. Millions of people participate in activities along the riverfront each year, including 20,000 that annually experience the water in boats from the Independence Seaport Museum; and

WHEREAS, The tidal Delaware River as well as the tidal lower Schuylkill are designated by the State of Pennsylvania as recreational water trails and both the PA Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, as well as the PA Fish & Boat Commission recognize their recreational value and seek to promote that value to all Pennsylvanians; and

WHEREAS, Nationally, American Rivers named the Delaware as its *River of the Year* for 2020, hailing it as a "national success story" for its dramatic revitalization from the decades spent polluted by industrial and sewage waste; and

WHEREAS, Under the Clean Water Act, water quality along much of the 330 Mile Delaware River has dramatically improved due to the combination of action taken by governments, utilities, businesses and citizens; and

WHEREAS, Philadelphia, along with its neighbors, Camden and Chester City, remain the only cities along the 330 miles of the Delaware River whose water quality is not sufficiently protected to allow primary contact recreation, indicating both a lack of attention toward public health and the right of communities to enjoy their local waters irrespective of where they live; and

WHEREAS, In certain Philadelphia communities, water quality from sewage pollution, largely from Combined Sewer Overflows (CSOs,) is threatening public health and quality of life of the residents of these areas. A lack of investment in sewer improvements and safe on-water recreation reinforces a narrative that lower-income Philadelphians are less deserving of clean water; and

WHEREAS, Philadelphians want improved, safe access to and safety within local rivers and streams to support the mental and physical wellbeing of residents, especially amid the upheaval of COVID19. Residents are already using the Delaware and Schuylkill Rivers to kayak, paddleboard and jet ski, and in the warmer weather to swim, cool off and build community; and

WHEREAS, New federal funding is available to begin to address this sewage/stormwater pollution and is already being accessed by Philadelphia's neighbors, Camden and Chester City; and

WHEREAS, With new federal funding only appropriated for the next five years, it is imperative for Philadelphia to join its neighbors and apply for funding from these new funding sources, with a specific focus on addressing the city's pervasive CSO pollution problems; and

WHEREAS, Many of the new federal sources empower disadvantaged areas to access the funding by requiring that a certain percentage of funding be spent in these areas; and

WHEREAS, Additionally these federal funding sources include various provisions to provide disadvantaged areas with funding that turns loans into grants with "principal forgiveness"; and

WHEREAS, Philadelphia is 10 years into implementation of its 25 year Long Term Control Plan, "Green Cities/Clean Water," a nationally recognized effort to use nature based practices to reduce stormwater runoff; and

WHEREAS, The availability of these new federal funds, not available when the Green Cities/Clean Water plan was drafted, represent an opportunity to expedite the reduction of pollution from sewage/stormwater and accelerate Plan implementation; and

WHEREAS, There is new support from the Delaware River Basin Commission (DRBC) for designating this section of the River under the Clean Water Act as "primary contact recreation."; and

WHEREAS, Commercial shipping safely co-exists with on-water recreation on rivers and streams across the country and should not be used as an excuse to deny Philadelphia its share of federal funding to clean up local rivers; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED, THAT THE COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA, Hereby authorizes the Committee on Commerce and Economic Development to hold public hearings to examine what the Philadelphia Water Department is or could be doing to take advantage of new and existing federal water quality infrastructure funding to address chronic sewage overflows in overburdened communities and improve the water quality of the Delaware and Schuylkill Rivers for public recreational use.

FURTHER RESOLVED, That the Committee on Commerce and Economic Development request that the Philadelphia Water Department provide a report, within 60 days, that outlines the Department's plans to (1) identify infrastructure projects that will reduce bacterial contamination, improve water quality, reduce flooding, provide sustainable jobs, and support community health in areas where existing or potential recreational use of the River is occurring or could occur; and (2) obtain federal or state funding to support the implementation of these actions. That public hearings shall be held to present the findings of this clean water infrastructure funding plan in order to ensure timely submission and procurement of Bipartisan Infrastructure Law or other funding for the benefit of the public health and the improvement of the City's waterways.

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