



Press Release

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After more than two decades South River headwaters get help

Approximately one and a half miles north of Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport in the southern headwaters of the South River is a collection of primarily defunct industrial parcels collectively referred to as the “Tift Site.” The Tift Site is located on land which borders South Martin Street, Norman Berry Drive, and Central Avenue in East Point.

In 1995, the Tift Site was added to Georgia’s Hazardous Site Inventory as a Class 1 hazardous waste site – the highest designation based on risk assigned by the Georgia Environmental Protection Division (GA EPD). For more than two decades, GA EPD has been negotiating with owners (or Principal Responsible Parties) of five of the seven parcels that makeup the Tift Site to develop plans to deal with soil and ground water contamination. The remaining two sites are owned by East Point Housing Authority and Owens-Illinois Corporation. Based on sampling, soil on the site contains acetophenone, copper, zinc, arsenic, and silver. A mixture of barium, nickel, zinc, arsenic, and cadmium has been found in the ground water. The metal of greatest concern identified in both soil and groundwater is lead which poses a serious threat to human health and the environment. Contamination on the site has been linked to cotton mills, fertilizers plants, and manufacturers of other chemicals that have occupied the site over many, many decades.



Figure 1 South River Headwaters off Norman Berry Drive

Jackie Echols, president of South River Watershed Alliance became aware of the Tift Site in 2011 while searching for the headwaters of the South River. “My research and search led me to a wooded industrial site off Norman Berry Drive at South Martin Street. A map of the area showed a wooded area, several buildings, and a parking lot where the stream should have been. The original stream had been piped and covered over many, many decades earlier. Finally, I found where the stream emerged from a large culvert into the daylight in the right of way along Norman Berry Drive. I immediately knew something was wrong – the color of the water was a very un-natural milky blue.”

Reports from long time residents of the area confirmed that the stream had been this color for as long as they could remember. A quarter mile downstream in River Park, the stream, which first flows past Parkland Elementary School, has been fenced-off to keep residents and visitors away. Hannah Palmer, a resident of East Point commented, “I find it alarming that this noticeably contaminated stream flows behind public housing, an elementary school, through backyards and next to a playground. As a mom, I would like some reassurance that the soil is safe before I would let my children play at River Park. For decades, the East Washington community and River Park neighborhood have been trying to get help with this problem. Just because it’s always been this way, doesn’t mean it should be acceptable.”

The milky blue color confirms the presence of different pollutants. The proposed fix for the problem is a constructed wetland that will filter out contaminants, improve water quality in the stream, and return the stream to its natural color. Based on the corrective action plan filed with GA EPD, work will begin fourth quarter 2019, with completion scheduled first quarter of 2020.

So why has it taken so long to clean up this problem? The short answer is that between 2004 and 2011 the Georgia legislature re-directed \$71,000,000 of the \$125,000,000 collected for the Hazardous Waste Trust Fund to the state’s general budget to pay for general operations such as public education, health, safety, and transportation. The trust fund, which is funded by fines and tipping fees is supposed to help EPD pay for cleanup of hazardous sites when property owners fail to take responsibility.

“The proposed constructed wetland will not solve all of the contamination issues related to the headwaters of the South River, but on-the-ground work to repair the stream is long overdue”, states Echols. The health of residents and their community depend on the health of the environment where they live particularly in urban areas like this one . . . the Tift Site is a very good example of this reality,” she continued.

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