

Sewage in the River

At times the attitudes and actions of Colorado's Department of Health beggars all understanding. Ostensibly constituted to work for, and preserve public health it recently gave tacit approval to conduct which is a distinct health hazard and which it had previously spent years trying to mitigate.

At present the Aspen Sanitation District, with 80 some outlets on its new sewer line, in addition to those outlets in existence before the system was built last fall, is disgorging its sewage into the Roaring Fork River.

In the past, when Aspen's small sewer system ran into the river the Public Health Department was shrill in its objection. Unsanitary, dangerous, bad, they screamed and took action to stop the practice. As a result a sanitation district was created, a bond issue passed, and construction initiated on a new sewer system.

The lines and the disposal plant were started last fall. Unfortunately only the lines were finished before winter put a stop to construction. With new pipe in the ground, the sanitation district began immediately selling connections. It didn't seem to matter that the waste went into the river and that every new outlet added more waste to the stream. Nor did it matter to the State Department of Health, because it was not done until the department's unofficial approval was received. And as soon as the winter was over and the ground soft enough to work more sewer connections were made, and yet more excrement spewed into the river.

Granted the sanitation district had new lines and needed revenue to pay bond interest, granted the disposal plant is scheduled to be completed in July, (it was originally slated for November, 1957, termination) and granted the river is high and swiftly carries away the filth, this does not change the fact that human sewage is being dumped into the river, and more is being added daily. This does not make right or safe what was wrong or dangerous before the money was spent for the new system.

We can not understand the state's position in this instance. Nor can we understand the attitude of the sanitation district. Most of the new sewer connections were formerly served by cesspools. There was no real need to connect many of them before the completion of the disposal plant. Why foul the river unnecessarily, why not wait with all non-emergency connections until the plant could be finished and the sewage treated? State officials after all are only interested in supposedly safeguarding our health, the danger is ours; as is the river. We are the ones who would suffer from an epidemic and must live with the fetid river.

Aspen Times Editorial, May 22, 1958

Aspen's sewer collection pipeline system was completed in the late summer of 1957, but construction of the "disposal plant" was slowed and eventually stopped during the winter of 1957-'58. The District, in an effort to gain revenue, started selling connections to the collection system as work progressed, well before the treatment plant was completed. Until such time, untreated sewage was dumped directly into the Roaring Fork River, a continuing decades-old practice. As completion of the plant neared, but before it was fully operational, the sewage was ground into small pieces and disinfected with chlorine before disposal into the river. The disposal plant finally came on-line in August of 1958, at the current location of the District administration offices.