TORONTO

REPORT FOR INFORMATION

Initial Community Notification Framework and Approach to Reporting and Tracking for Odour Issues at Ashbridges Wastewater Treatment Plant

Date: May 19, 2026
To: City Council
From: General Manager, Toronto Water
Wards: 14 - Toronto - Danforth

SUMMARY

The Ashbridges Bay Treatment Plant (ABTP), one of four wastewater treatment facilities operated by the City of Toronto, serves an equivalent population of approximately 1.39 million residents. In April 2026, a mechanical issue occurred involving one of the plant's primary treatment tanks, requiring the tank to be taken out of service for nearly two weeks. During this period, odours in the surrounding area became more concentrated, resulting in complaints from nearby residents. These concerns were communicated to the City through multiple channels, including 311, direct contact with plant operations staff, and correspondence with the local Councillor's office. Interim operational measures were implemented to mitigate impacts, and repairs were subsequently completed, returning the tank to service.

Odour issues associated with wastewater treatment facilities are common and typically short-lived. Similar temporary odour events can also be caused by local sewers and major sewer pipes. Wind direction, temperature, humidity, and other weather conditions can significantly affect how odours travel and are perceived. Investigating odour complaints and identifying the exact source can be complex, as conditions may change between the time an odour is reported and when staff are able to conduct a site investigation. While plant operations staff monitor odours year-round and take steps to reduce impacts, the current complaint-handling process involves multiple intake channels and separate processes for sewer-related and treatment plant-related odours. This fragmented intake approach can make it difficult to track overall complaint trends and may result in inconsistent communication with the public.

To address these gaps, and in response to direction from the Infrastructure and Environment Committee (2026.IE29.9), Toronto Water is reviewing the end-to-end odour complaint handling process to improve communications for issues arising from the operations of Ashbridges Bay Wastewater Treatment Plant and improve reporting and tracking of these issues. Toronto Water and the Customer Experience Division are working closely to enable reporting and tracking of wastewater treatment plant odour

complaints through 311, by introducing a new service request for these issues across all existing 311 channels and enabling reporting through 311's dashboards. In addition, Toronto Water is working closely with the Communications Division to create a community notification framework and protocol. Both of these together will improve clarity, coordination, streamlining reporting and transparency while maintaining timely operational response.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

There are no financial implications resulting from the adoption of the recommendations contained in this report.

The Chief Financial Officer and Treasurer has reviewed this report and agrees with the financial impact information.

DECISION HISTORY

At its meeting on May 6, 2026, the Infrastructure and Environment Committee requested the General Manager, Toronto Water, in consultation with the Deputy City Manager, Infrastructure Services, the Deputy City Manager, Corporate Services and the Chief Communications Officer to report directly to the May 20, 21 and 22, 2026 meeting of City Council with an initial framework for an improved communications protocol for issues arising from the operations of the Ashbridges Bay Wastewater Treatment Plant and a clear portal that captures and tracks all service requests related to its operations, and to include information in this report on whether there are any requirements in the Environmental Compliance Approval for a communications protocol with the surrounding community.
https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2026.IE29.9

COMMENTS

Issue Background

The Ashbridges Bay Treatment Plant (ABTP) is critical municipal infrastructure; it plays an essential role in protecting public health, the environment, and water quality for residents across Toronto. It is one of the largest and oldest wastewater treatment plants in Canada. The plant provides sewage treatment for wastewater collected from residents and businesses that are within its servicing boundaries.

In late April 2026, a mechanical issue occurred at the ABTP related to one of the plant's primary tanks. In a primary wastewater treatment tank (often called a primary clarifier), there is a large piece of moving equipment known as a bridge. This bridge slowly travels across the tank to help move settled solids (sludge) to collection points so they can be removed from the water. The bridge operates on metal rails, similar to train tracks. At this tank, the rails became misaligned, which led to a bridge failure and required the tank to be taken out of service for nearly two weeks. Upon identifying the issue, plant

staff put temporary operational measures in place to help reduce odours (removing scum using a vacuum truck) while repairs continued. The affected tank was repaired and returned to service on April 25, 2026.

While the tank was out of service, odours in the area became more concentrated, leading to several complaints from residents. These complaints were communicated to the City through various channels, including through 311, direct contact with plant operations staff, and correspondence with the local Councillor's office. Toronto Water's Customer Care team received six sewer odour complaints from the area near the plant during that time. Plant staff received three odour complaints directly and three were routed from 311. Despite these figures, it remains evident that more residents from the local community had concerns about the lasting odour during this time period than were captured through formal complaints.

The existing notification process, whereby community and elected officials are made aware of the issue and information is shared proactively, failed in this instance due to human error not commencing the cascade. Additionally, there are no existing community notification tools in use for this facility as recent upgrades, which drastically reduced odour issues, also reduced the need for an active community engagement group.

Odour Mitigation Measures and Capital Investments

Since 2012, the City invested more than $305 million in an Odour Reduction Program consisting of six state-of-good-repair construction projects at ABTP, with a focus on odour reduction and mitigation. The goal of the program was to reduce plant-wide odour and total reduced sulphur impact beyond the plant property. All projects were completed and were operational by 2020. Details are available in Appendix G – Odour Reduction Plan of the ABTP 2020 Annual Report and in Attachment 1.

Additionally, all the primary tanks at the ABTP will be repaired, with all mechanical and electrical equipment replaced. The projects will occur in stages, with work scheduled so the plant can continue operating without interruption throughout the project. The largest tanks will undergo work in 2028 and the remaining primary tanks refurbished between 2028 and 2031. These upgrades are essential in maintaining uninterrupted wastewater treatment service, while modernizing key infrastructure.

Many of the plant's major components are aging and require replacement or rehabilitation to ensure the facility can continue to operate safely, efficiently, and in compliance with environmental regulations now and into the future. These investments are important to maintain the long-term reliability and performance of the ABTP, while helping to reduce impacts on the surrounding community.

The odour reduction investments were specifically designed to improve air quality around the plant by reducing odour emissions from wastewater treatment processes. In addition to improving the condition and performance of critical infrastructure, these projects support a better experience for nearby residents by helping to minimize odours.

Understanding Odour Issues

Odours near wastewater treatment plants are common and can be caused by local sewers, major sewer pipes, weather conditions and other site-specific factors. Warmer temperatures and certain weather conditions, like high winds can make normal treatment-related odours more noticeable at times.

Because of this, plant operations staff are best positioned to assess the situation, determine possible causes, and respond appropriately based on their operational knowledge and experience. Plant staff monitor odours year-round and take steps to minimize impacts wherever possible, recognizing that odour concerns can occur periodically, especially during seasonal transitions.

Investigating an odour complaint and determining its source can be challenging. There is often a delay between when an odour is reported and when a thorough investigation can be conducted, during which time wind and weather conditions may change. Investigations typically begin at the residence, where household plumbing is often the source. If the odour is detected outdoors, staff inspect nearby sanitary sewers for blockages or other potential sources, as well as local catch basins and storm sewers for possible cross-connections. In some cases, sewers located near a wastewater treatment plant may generate odours even when the plant itself is not the source. Additionally, individual sensitivity to odours can vary, making it difficult to consistently assess their intensity objectively.

Current State Assessment

Toronto Water, in collaboration with the Customer Experience Division, has identified opportunities to improve how odour concerns related to wastewater treatment plant operations are received, tracked, coordinated, and relayed to the public.

Currently, there are two main types of odour complaints handled by Toronto Water: (1) sewer odours, believed to originate from local sewer infrastructure, and (2) odours believed to originate from a wastewater treatment plant. These complaints are managed through different processes depending on the nature of the concern and how it is reported. Sewer odours are captured as formal service requests, reported through 311, and directed to Toronto Water Customer Care for investigation and response.

Complaints related to odours believed to originate from a wastewater treatment plant follow a different process. Under the current process, residents contacting 311 via phone regarding treatment plant odours are transferred directly to the plant control room, which operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week, so plant staff can immediately investigate operational conditions and determine appropriate actions. Plant staff are responsible for following up with complainants within two business days regarding actions taken or findings from the investigation.

While this approach supports direct operational response, complaints about odours from a wastewater treatment plant are not currently captured as formal 311 service requests or reflected in centralized 311 reporting tools. As a result, there is currently no single

system that captures the full volume of treatment plant-related odour concerns across all intake channels.

This fragmented approach limits the City's ability to monitor complaint trends, assess community impacts, and maintain a consistent corporate understanding of odour-related concerns in the surrounding area.

The review also identified opportunities to strengthen coordination and consistency in public communications related to operational or construction activities that may contribute to odour issues. Currently, there is no formalized process to ensure aligned messaging across all City divisions and Councillor's offices. In addition, there is no dedicated mechanism through the City's website to proactively notify residents of operational issues or activities that may temporarily increase odours in the surrounding community.

Initial Framework for an Enhanced Notification Protocol

To assist in preparing a community notification framework and protocol, Toronto Water is reviewing the end-to-end odour complaint handling processes in collaboration with the Customer Experience Division and Communications Division. This work will focus on clearly communicating new and updated ways for the public to report these issues through 311 and enhancing visibility into trends while preserving the ability for operations staff to respond in real time.

The framework will clarify internal roles and information-sharing across divisions to ensure timely awareness of emerging issues, improved visibility into patterns and trends across reporting channels, and coordinated engagement with Councillor offices and residents when required. At the same time, the approach will preserve the ability for operations staff to respond quickly and effectively in real time, and will avoid premature attribution of odour sources, recognizing the context-dependent and often subjective nature of odour concerns. The intent is to improve transparency and coordination while maintaining operational integrity and responsiveness.

In addition to reviewing public-facing communications, the framework will address the internal flow of information and coordination between divisions, including triggers for notification, regular engagement to address anticipated seasonal or operational issues contributing to odours in the area and tracking and monitoring. This will ensure the framework and protocol are in place well before anticipated seasonal odour issues in the spring.

Proposed Approach to Reporting and Tracking through 311

Toronto Water and the Customer Experience Division are working closely to enable reporting and tracking of wastewater treatment plant odour complaints through 311, through introducing a new service request for these issues across all existing 311 channels. Reporting through 311 allows customers to track their service requests through to completion, routes requests and customer details directly to Toronto Water

for action, and supports better data collection on these issues, improving visibility into complaint volumes, locations, trends, and recurring issues, and allowing Toronto Water to better assess operational impacts and identify patterns over time.

In addition, reporting and tracking through 311 supports greater transparency and accountability, as 311 regularly reports on service request volumes and service levels on its public and councillor dashboards.

Operational staff would continue to play a critical role in investigating and responding to odour concerns in real time. Reporting through 311 is intended to centralize and strengthen coordination and reporting while maintaining the operational expertise and immediate response capabilities currently provided by plant staff.

Toronto Water Internal Operating Protocol Improvements

There are clear opportunities to simplify and standardize odour complaint management through enabling reporting and tracking through 311. Applying this approach across all treatment plants would improve coordination, reduce confusion, and strengthen overall service delivery. Improved coordination between City divisions would also strengthen the internal escalation processes and help ensure that operational issues with broader community impacts are identified and shared more quickly.

Toronto Water maintains internal incident notification and escalation protocols through the Toronto Water Incident Status Escalation and Response (TWISTER) framework. TWISTER is intended to support the timely identification, escalation, coordination, and management of operational issues and incidents that may have service, environmental, regulatory, or public impacts.

The recent odour event highlighted opportunities to strengthen and modernize the operational application of the TWISTER framework. While the framework itself is structurally sound, its current implementation relies significantly on staff interpretation and experience, rather than standardized triggers, streamlined guidance, and clearly defined escalation criteria. This can result in variability in how incidents are assessed, escalated, and communicated across operational areas.

Toronto Water will be looking to refine and strengthen the TWISTER framework to support more consistent operational decision-making, escalation, and communications coordination. This work includes the development of simplified and more prescriptive guidance for frontline staff and supervisors, including clearer incident triggers, escalation thresholds, notification requirements, and defined roles and responsibilities.

The review will also focus on strengthening alignment between TWISTER and related emergency response, spill response, and community notification processes to support coordinated and timely responses during incidents with broader community impacts. As part of this work, Toronto Water will develop updated training and awareness materials to support consistent application of the protocol across operational areas. Toronto Water will also work with Communications and divisional leadership to improve coordination and support more proactive public communications during operational events.

Environmental Compliance Approval Requirements and Operating Protocols

The City has a protocol for receiving, responding to and recording odour and noise complaints received from the public, in accordance with the Environmental Compliance Approval (ECA) for ABTP. An ECA is a mandatory permit issued by the Ontario Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks that allows businesses to operate facilities that may release contaminants into the air, land or water.

Although Toronto Water staff followed the existing protocol and remained in compliance with the ECA requirements at all times, the recent odour event highlighted opportunities to improve the City's overall complaint intake and community notification processes. In particular, not all concerns raised by residents were consistently captured through existing reporting channels, and public messaging regarding the odour issue were not provided as quickly or broadly as they need to be in future. These observations have informed the proposed frameworks and next steps outlined in this report.

Next Steps

Toronto Water, in consultation with the Deputy City Manager, Infrastructure Services, the Deputy City Manager, Corporate Services and the Chief Communications Officer, will continue to refine the proposed community notification and complaint management framework for issues related to operations at the ABTP. As part of this work, staff will implement a process for reporting and tracking wastewater treatment plant odours through 311, as well as processes for escalation, and public notification to improve transparency through reporting, responsiveness, and consistency in service delivery.

In the near term, Toronto Water and partner divisions will review and refine internal notification and escalation processes to help ensure operational issues with broader community impacts are shared in a timely and coordinated manner across operational, communications, and customer service teams.

Communications division staff will also continue to evaluate opportunities for new proactive public communications, including potential website enhancements, notification tools, and standardized messaging to better inform residents when operational or construction activities may contribute to temporary odour impacts. Additionally, in consultation with the local Councillor, Toronto Water will asses if there is local community interest in reinstating the Ashbridges Bay Treatment Plant Neighbourhood Liaison Committee. The committee allowed residents and businesses to discuss plant-related issues with City staff. Members also had the opportunity to provide input on issues related to the plant that could affect the surrounding community.

CONTACT

William Fernandes, Deputy General Manager, Toronto Water, 416-392-8220, William.Fernandes@toronto.ca

Sam Zurzolo, Director, Technology & Customer Experience, Toronto Water, 416-397-7336, Sam.Zurzolo2@toronto.ca

SIGNATURE

Lou Di Gironimo
General Manager, Toronto Water

ATTACHMENTS

Attachment 1 - Pamphlet on Odour Controls at ABTP