

Operators Of Muskoka Resort Ignored Concerns About Sewage Treatment Problems

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Local resident Paul Richards stands on a boardwalk running through the marsh that has received untreated raw sewage from adjacent JW Marriott Rosseau Muskoka Resort, which flows into Lake Rosseau in Minett, ON.

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Operators of a high-end Muskoka resort ignored past concerns about sewage treatment problems, the Ontario Environment Ministry alleges in an order issued after untreated effluents from the holiday destination overflowed onto a hill that slopes down to nearby Lake Rosseau.

The order was sent to JW Marriott The Rosseau Resort & Spa two weeks ago, after sewage spilled from its waste treatment plant on June 30 and July 1. The document said other incidents had occurred in the past four years.

A manager said the resort is adhering to the order, which requires the waste-plant operator to be at the site daily, weekly reporting to the ministry on operations, and the hiring of an engineering consultant to review the facility. "We're totally in compliance now," William Morgan, the resort's director of finance, said in an interview.

Opened a decade ago, the 221-room Marriott franchise is owned by Niagara Resorts (Muskoka) Inc. It is in the hamlet of Minett, in cottage country, a 2½ hour drive north of Toronto.

The Rosseau is bordered by a marina and a golf course. Raw sewage is filtered and disinfected in a building near the marina, then discharged in a pond on the golf course, which overflows into a wetland that discharges eventually into the lake.

On June 30 and July 1, increased volumes of sewage overwhelmed the treatment facility and ran toward Lake Rosseau, the order said. Contractors were called to clean up.



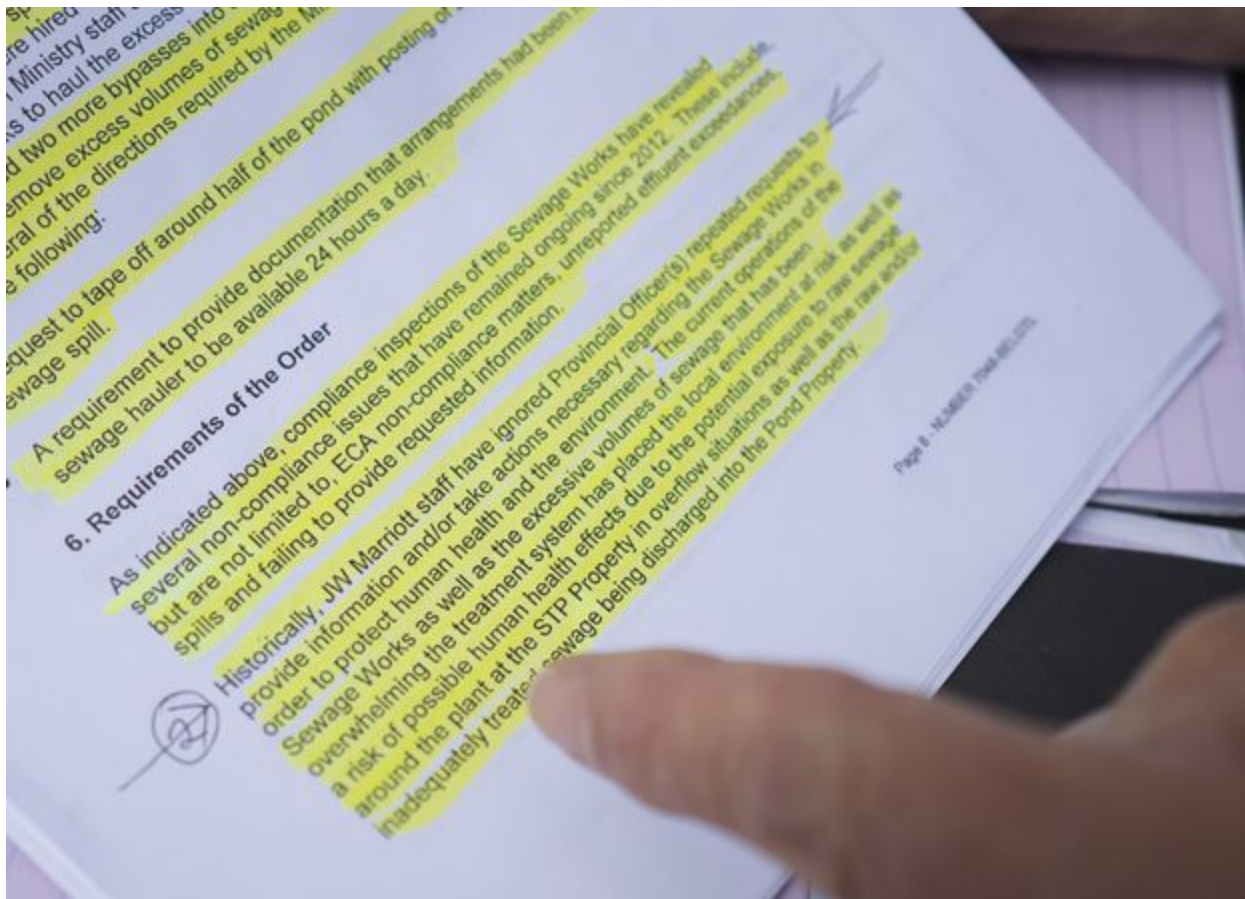
JW Marriott The Rosseau Muskoka Resort & Spa is under fire from the Ontario Environment Ministry, which issued an order to the hotel over incidents concerning sewage treatment problems.
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“Ministry staff were on site on both days and several of the directions required by the ministry were not carried out,” the document said, citing as an example the resort’s failure to post signs warning of the spill.

It added that “raw sewage has discharged onto the ground at the sewage works which flowed down a steep hill towards the nearby Lake Rosseau, and adjacent to the marina ... resulting in potential exposure to humans and their pets swimming or walking in the area.”

Furthermore, some of the sewage directed to the pond was untreated, meaning golfers could be exposed, “which could result in adverse health effects and exposure to pathogens and viruses, etc.,” the order said.

Andrew Vitaterna of Clearford ASI, which operates the waste treatment facility, said “the spills are minor in terms of volume.” He estimated the discharge down the hill was the equivalent of a 40-litre drum, and was absorbed into the ground before it reached the lake.



Local resident Paul Richards points to an Ontario Environment Ministry document stating that, "Historically, JW Marriott The Rosseau Muskoka Resort staff have ignored Provincial Officers(S) repeated requests to provide information and/or take actions necessary regarding the Sewage Works in order to protect human health and the environment."

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The order said: "Historically, JW Marriott staff have ignored provincial officer(s)' repeated requests to provide information and/or take actions necessary regarding the sewage works in order to protect human health and the environment," the order said.

Mr. Morgan and Mr. Vitaterna said they were not aware of past failures to heed requests from the ministry. "I was a little surprised to see that in the order," Mr. Vitaterna said.

The order said raw sewage spilled in July, 2015, December, 2017, and July, 2018. It added that past inspections also found other issues, for example, a sand filter wasn't in use and paperwork wasn't properly completed. (Mr. Vitaterna said the sand filter wasn't necessary.)

"Inspections of the sewage works have revealed several non-compliance issues that have remained ongoing since 2012," the order said.

The latest spills occurred at a time when residents and cottagers are worried about the impact of tourism development on the local environment.

The issue was discussed on Friday in a planning committee meeting of Township of Muskoka Lakes council that was live-streamed. "We do have a problem right now," Paul Richards, a cottager who had obtained a copy of the order, told the councillors.

The meeting's chairwoman, councillor Barb Bridgeman, said it was "a quite disturbing situation involving the JW Marriott ... there's a lot of, I think, disbelief."

While the sewage treatment plant is a provincial responsibility, councillor Frank Jaglowitz said any future requests for development permits from the resort should be contingent on being compliant with regulations on sewage treatment.

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