



Open Line

a newsletter for you, our residents

PROTECTING AUBURN'S WATERWAYS: Lessons from 'The Blob'

Marla Smith will never forget The Blob.

She was sitting at her desk when the first message appeared in her inbox, followed immediately by phone call after phone call.

It was August 21, 2019, and a sighting occurred in a main waterway flowing to Town Creek. Residents were alarmed; the thing — whatever it was — was growing.

"The Blob," Marla says ominously, remembering that day. As the Watershed Division Manager, she helps protect Auburn's water bodies from contamination and monitors the municipal separate storm sewer system, or MS4.

The Blob was large, white and...foamy — a mass of tightly packed bubbles wrapping around trees and under roots as it floated curiously on, increasing in size with each waterfall. Not quite like the carnivorous, oozing alien in the movie of the same name, but close enough.

"A local construction project had spilled some hydraulic oil and went to clean it and used soap — way too much soap — and washed it off," Marla said. "They didn't think anything of it, but the more water that was added and the further it went downstream, the bigger it got. People were startled at this foam that was blowing up into a huge mass creeping its way through the woods quite literally like The Blob."

In their investigation, Marla and her team learned that the construction workers were just trying to do what they thought was the right thing; they had even used biodegradable soap.

"We made the determination that it wasn't going to have a negative effect on anything or harm aquatic life," said Marla, who has seen all kinds of things in the field during her many years of working in water quality control. She previously worked for the State of

Alabama before coming to the City of Auburn.

Not every situation is as comical or harmless. When reports of possible contaminants in Auburn waterbodies reach the watershed team, they investigate to determine the source, the chemicals and the details of what happened. Then they take action to mitigate any damage, as necessary. Essentially, part of their job is detective work.

Some cases are open and shut.

Dusty Kimbrow, watershed program coordinator, was working in a neighborhood one day when he observed an individual bagging up pet waste, which can contaminate nearby waterways. Before he could praise them for doing their part to protect Auburn's water systems, the individual tossed the plastic sack in the storm drain.

"They went to all that effort to pick up the dog waste and, without realizing it, ended up contaminating

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the waterbody anyway by throwing it down the storm inlet into the creek,” Marla said. “Unfortunately, people don’t realize that the little holes at the end of the street do not go to our treatment facility. It’s a straight fairway to the creek.”

“Most people don’t want to pollute if they know better,” Dusty added. “Those instances are just about educating people.”

And education is a big part of what the team does — making sure people know how they can pitch in to help protect local water sources and wildlife. Everyday things like pet waste, grass clippings, paint and cement harm Auburn’s water systems. Picking up pet waste and throwing it in the garbage, or bagging grass clippings and leaves and setting them out on your regular collection day — both are easy ways to make a big difference.

Another way is by reporting potential violations of illicit discharge into Auburn’s water system — like a truck dumping concrete into a storm drain or someone offloading leftover paint into the gutter. An illicit discharge is any foreign substance that enters the waterways, and if you question whether what you’re seeing is illicit discharge, the watershed team encourages you to report it anyway. You can report by calling the Watershed Division at 334-501-3060 or by using the Auburn FixIt app. The more information you can provide, the better, such as a photo or a company name.

The team will investigate, and if given information about who is doing the dumping, will follow up with a warning. A second offense could land someone a citation for putting Auburn’s water sources at risk.

“We do rely on citizens because there are only two

stormwater coordinators, one watershed coordinator and one of me,” Marla said. “The creeks and streams are like a toddler; they don’t have a voice, so we have to be a voice for them.”

Another important tip that may feel obvious: Don’t litter.

“Auburn does a good job of cleaning up roadsides, but once you get back into some of our streams, there is a lot of litter,” Dusty said. “What flies out of your truck eventually makes its way to the lowest point — the stream.”

To maintain pollutant-free waterways, Dusty and other staff members are out in the field every day, doing periodic sampling throughout town and collecting data. If bacteria is found in the water that exceeds water quality standards, Dusty will make his way upstream, conducting sampling along the way to determine where the problem is.

In the case of E. coli, for example, following it upstream usually results in locating a broken sewer line, which triggers the Sewer Division to get involved and make repairs, place signage up to instruct people to stay out of the creek and test the water until it goes back to a normal threshold.

In this way, the team aims to keep our water clean, to the benefit of the Auburn community and local wildlife.

“We take pride in our local water resources,” Dusty said. “Thinking about how we all live in the same city, we all live really in the same watersheds, too. So, what happens in our yards affects people downstream. Be cognizant of that, knowing that we’re all connected through the land.”

To learn more about the Watershed Division team, visit auburnal.gov/water-resource-management/watershed.



Dusty Kimbrow tests water samples in the field.

Solid waste rate changes coming October 2025

Starting Oct. 1, Auburn residents who are subscribed to the City’s solid waste services (including garbage, trash & recycling) will see an adjustment in their collection rates for the first time since 2014.

Curbside collection will increase from \$23.50 to \$32. Backdoor collection will increase from \$33.50 to \$69.50.

Why a change?

Over time, the cost per customer for these services has become more than the fees we charge. So, even though the number of customers has grown, service fees don’t cover the cost of the growing demand for the City’s solid waste services.

Since 2014, the number of households the City services has risen by 55%, from 12,563 to 19,504. These services are funded through an enterprise fund designed to be self-sustaining by covering all operational and capital costs. Over the past 13 years, the City’s general fund has provided \$3.1 million to bridge the gap between service costs and user fees. And the annual amount the general fund has had to subsidize is increasing.

So far this year, the general fund has transferred \$1.4 million and will contribute an additional \$600,000 before the year ends. Our projections show that within the next four years, the general fund would have to subsidize around \$9 million to cover the services if the rates were to stay where they are.

The goal of the upcoming rate increase is to make the Solid Waste Fund more self-sufficient so it can cover its own costs without subsidies from tax revenue that funds other City services. This helps us better prepare for current needs and future growth without impacting the general fund, which supports other essential City services like Police, Fire, Public Works and Parks and Recreation.

Why increase the rates now?

Periodically, we enlist the help of an outside agency to conduct rate studies to assess and forecast the financial needs of our solid waste services. The last two were conducted in 2017 and 2023. Both of those recommended rate increases to cover the cost of the services.

While we were preparing to implement a rate increase in 2019, those plans were put on pause as economic uncertainty arose during COVID-19. Instead, we opted to continue subsidies from the general fund to absorb rising costs and reduce the burden on our residents during that time. The upcoming change is intended to bring the fund closer to financial sustainability without relying on the general fund, reserving those funds for other essential services.

For more information, visit auburnal.gov/es.



Whether you’re a sports enthusiast, a music lover, or a dog owner looking for some fun, Auburn Parks and Recreation has something for everyone.

High school and youth **basketball registration** kicks off on Tuesday, Sept. 16. Visit auburnal.myrec.com to register and find more details about age divisions and league play.

Mark your calendars for our beloved **Dog Days of Summer Doggy Pool Pawty** on Saturday, Sept. 20, from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. at Samford Pool! This free event invites you and your furry friend to enjoy a splash-tastic day before the pool closes for the season. With doggy splash zones, treat stations, photo ops and plenty of wagging tails, it’s a paw-sitively perfect way to end the summer. All dogs must be accompanied by an adult and have proof of current vaccinations. Please note: humans will not be allowed to swim while dogs are in the pool.

Close out your September with great music and good company at the Fall **Live & Local Concert Series**, beginning Thursday, Sept. 25, at Kiesel Park. The free concert kicks off at 5:30 p.m. Bring a blanket or lawn chair and enjoy a relaxing evening outdoors. The concert series continues every Thursday through Oct. 16, so don’t miss your chance to enjoy local music under the stars!

Labor Day closures

Most City facilities will be closed on Monday, Sept. 1, in observance of Labor Day. Public Safety services including police, fire and communications will remain on their regular schedules. Garbage, trash and recycling collection will be delayed by one day throughout the week.

The Auburn Public Library’s book drops will remain open, and the online collection of e-books, e-audiobooks and digital magazines is always available at auburnal.gov/library. Find info about Parks and Recreation facility hours at auburnal.gov/parks.

Downtown parking will be free except for the Wright Street Parking Deck.

Board & commission apps

The Auburn City Council will make appointments to the Industrial Development Board and the Lee County Youth Development Center in September.

Interested in serving? Applications will open on Aug. 20. Find more info at auburnal.gov/boards.

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upcoming events

Open Line is produced by the
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S	M	T	W	T	F	S
	1	2	3	4	5	6
	Curiosity Crew Mondays @ 3:30 p.m. Cemetery Advisory Board 4 p.m.	Preschool Story Time Tuesdays @ 9:30 a.m. Parks & Recreation Advisory Board 11:45 a.m. PreK in PJs Tuesdays @ 1 p.m. S.T.E.A.M. Lab Tuesdays @ 3:30 p.m. Bedtime Buddies Tuesdays @ 6 p.m. Committee of the Whole TBD City Council 6 p.m.	Baby's 1st Story Time Wednesdays @ 9:30 a.m. Untidy Tales Wednesdays @ 1 p.m. Awesome Art Wednesdays @ 4 p.m. Board of Zoning Adjustment 4:30 p.m.	Toddler Tales Thursdays @ 9:30 a.m. Lullabies for Little Ones Thursdays @ 1 p.m. An Evening with Allen Levi (Author) 5:30-7 p.m.	Puppet Shows Fridays @ 9:30 a.m. & 3:30 p.m. Tree Commission 11:30 a.m.	Family Story Time Saturdays @ 9:30 a.m. Untidy Tales Saturdays @ 10:30 a.m. Movers & Shakers Saturdays @ 1 p.m. Create! Your Own Bud Vase 2-4 p.m.
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
	Planning Commission Packet Meeting Noon	Historic Preservation Commission 4 p.m. Teddy Bear Night 5:30-7:30 p.m.		City Council Agenda Review Meeting 4 p.m. Planning Commission 5 p.m.		
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
		Auburn Public Library Board 10 a.m. Greenspace Advisory Board Noon Create! Your Own Bud Vase 2-4 p.m. Chapter Chats Book Club 5:30 p.m. Committee of the Whole TBD City Council 6 p.m.		Water Works Board 4 p.m. Teen Night (Ages 13-18) 6-7:30 p.m.		Dog Days of Summer Doggy Pool Pawty 9 a.m.-2 p.m. @ Samford Pool Internet Safety Sessions: Adults 2-4:30 p.m.
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
				Fall Live & Local Music Series 5:30 p.m. @ Kiesel Park		Internet Safety Sessions: Students (4th-7th grade) 2-4:30 p.m.
28	29	30				
				Programs & events are subject to change. Find up-to-date information at auburnal.gov .	Auburn Public Library auburnal.gov/library City Meetings auburnal.gov/boards Parks & Recreation auburnal.gov/parks Citywide Events auburnal.gov	Background Photo: A dog swims during the Doggy Pool Pawty at Samford Pool