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## A POLLUTION SOLUTION

**T**HE MASSACHUSETTS Water Resources Authority this week answered the question, How clean is clean enough for Boston Harbor beaches? The reply, which required three years of scientific and political calculations, is ingenious.

- In recent swimming seasons, at least one South Boston beach was closed due to foul water on 18 percent of tested days, according to a study carried out by the nonprofit Save the Harbor/Save the Bay. That's too much time. In 2000, the MWRA was pushing for an enormous pump station between East First Street and the Reserve Channel to eliminate practically all untreated discharges onto the beach. But nearby homeowners, fearing construction delay and odor, sued to block the plan. That level of clean invited only legal headaches.

To solve the problem, the MWRA first needed to abandon its exclusive focus on combined sewer overflow, or CSO — the untreated mixture of storm water and sewage that discharges onto the beaches after heavy storms. It turns out that it is polluted storm water, not CSO, that has accounted for more than 80 percent of the beach closings since 2000, according to the Save the Harbor/Save the Bay. Such damp-day closings could be dealt with only if the MWRA was willing to handle polluted storm water — an area outside its narrowly defined mandate.

On Monday night, the MWRA's executive director, Frederick Laskey, unveiled a \$257 million plan that calls for the construction of an underground storage conduit 17 feet in diameter below Day Boulevard. CSO would be nearly eliminated, according to Laskey; it would occur only during hurricanes or major floods. But the most innovative aspect of the plan envisions a series of gates, valves, and connectors to the existing outfall pipes that would allow for the storage of polluted storm water, including the sewage from broken pipes between homes and the sewer system. With the tunnel, beach closings associated with dirty storm water would take place once every five years on average, according to the MWRA.

South Boston residents who led the battle against the huge pump station hailed the new plan on Monday night. The proposal calls for a small pump station to be placed in the Conley Terminal, far from residences. Another win for the neighborhood is the proposed use of a tunnel boring machine that would minimize disruption to residents and traffic.

The MWRA and the Massachusetts Port Authority, which owns Conley Terminal, are nearing agreement on a price for the land and staging area needed for the project. Once that is in place, environmentalists and federal regulators who must sign off on the project should feel confident enough to be part of the solution.