Billy’s Creek is alarmingly polluted, but nowhere along its 5-mile stretch are people cautioned that even touching its waters could make them sick.

Running past more than 1,000 homes and two public parks in some of Fort Myers’ and Lee County’s poorest neighborhoods as it makes its way to the Caloosahatchee, the creek’s levels of enterococci bacteria consistently exceed government safety levels — and have since 2001.

Those bacteria indicate feces from humans or animals, and agencies have threshold danger levels. Looking at some 17 years of testing data, one site on the creek grossly exceeds that danger threshold 93 percent of the time.

Yet the creek has never been been officially declared polluted, nor has any agency or government taken formal responsibility for sounding the alarm about its health risks.
Group fights to warn public of polluted Billy’s Creek’s health dangers

A bicyclist passes over Billy’s Creek on Marsh Avenue in Fort Myers. The Calusa Waterkeeper found high bacteria levels in the creek and wants signs put up to warn the public. (Photo: Amanda Inscore/The News-Press)

“These are some serious levels we’re really concerned about ... It’s nothing to take lightly,” Calusa Waterkeeper John Cassani told the Fort Myers City Council on Monday. “Cautionary signage really needs to go up,” he said. “We’re really concerned kids are going to wade into the creek.” The probability of getting sick at such high levels of pollution “is just about 100 percent.”

Two “no swimming” symbol signs are posted within Fort Myers city limits and two others prohibit cast-netting, but those don’t come close to adequately warning about the creek’s potential peril.

A tricolored heron wades in Billy’s Creek on Tuesday, April 17, 2018. (Photo: Amanda Inscore/The News-Press)

So Cassani and his nonprofit have made it their mission to change that, speaking to City Council on Monday and the Lee County commissioners Tuesday, urging officials to let constituents know that this urban waterway is potentially hazardous to their health.

Some of those constituents came to underscore their concerns as well.

Fort Myers resident and NAACP member Deborah Lee asked City Council if racism might be the reason the creek has been so polluted for so long.

“I wonder if the failure to find solutions to the Billy Creek contamination and the Dunbar sludge problem have anything to do with the racial makeup of these neighborhoods,” Lee said.

**Billy’s Creek is ‘frighteningly’ polluted**

Attorney Terry Nelson spent a Fort Myers childhood in and on local waters, swimming, fishing, kayaking, doing “almost anything that can be done on the river including Billy’s Creek.” Now he’s a Waterkeeper volunteer in hopes of making it better. “This was a beautiful, wonderful place, and now we’re afraid to put our feet into it.”

Neil Wilkinson, FGCU’s Center of Environmental and Sustainability Education interim director, has a house on the creek. He told council members he’d had a student clean-up scheduled for Saturday, but “we can’t come here because the creek is too polluted with bacteria, (and) that’s a real shame.”

**Time to get funding and clean Billy’s Creek**

Wilkinson called on members of the greater business and condo community to pitch in and partner to help the creek: “WINK TV, who’s got their business right there … Allure … the Beau Rivage … Prima Luce and the Oasis … all those other buildings that are bringing in so much attention and wealth to this area to help partner and clean it up.”

City Manager Saeed Kazemi announced a new partnership with the county to study the source of the enteric bacteria, and said the city is committed to the creek.

That’s heartening for Cassani, as previous efforts to spur state and municipal agencies to action have met with responsibility shifting and little action. The Florida departments of environmental protection and health say posting warnings creekside isn’t their job (though the department does post signs on polluted beaches); Lee County, which includes the creek as part of its internationally publicized Calusa Blueway, says it’s the city’s responsibility.