

Sewers - in a perfect world

By Tanya Crites

In an absolutely perfect world, all sewer mainlines would be brand new, installed and backfilled correctly, inspected annually, with maintenance prioritized and completed on-time according to the priority schedule. Sewer mainlines would be impenetrable by tree roots and would last for hundreds of years. Abutting property owners would not dump foreign substances into the sewer and restaurants would obey all grease abatement rules and regulations. In a perfect world, sewer obstructions and back-ups would never happen. We can only dream...

In reality, municipalities are facing the daunting fact of aging infrastructure with limited funds for replacement. Some municipalities still have laws that do not require the abutting property owner to maintain the entire side sewer, all the way to the mainline, but have no real way for the municipality to inspect and maintain those private lines. Citizens continue to dump illegal substances into the sewers and restaurants do not maintain grease traps. Tree species with invasive roots are planted too close to side sewers and mainlines, inviting root intrusion into pipe joints, causing blockages. In reality, sewer obstructions and back-ups happen far too frequently.

We will likely never achieve a perfect sewer world. However, there are measures municipalities can take to minimize sewer mainline obstructions and back-ups. Doing so will also provide WCIA a better defense to the inevitable sewer back-up claim.

- Create laws that place side sewer maintenance responsibility, from the structure to the mainline, on the abutting property owner.
- Have a “prohibited wastes” and/or fats, oils and grease (FOG) ordinance/resolution with robust penalty provisions. Have a policy for enforcement of the law and strictly follow the enforcement procedures.
- Have an “approved tree species” planting list and permit process for tree planting in the right-of-way.
- Inspect sewer mainlines and other structures annually and maintain the records according to the state archives schedule.
- Using the current inspection information, prioritize maintenance annually (to include, jetting, rodding, repairing, re-inspection, etc.). Areas of mainline root intrusion, excessive grease, structural issues (dips, pipe offsets) and areas with a history of reported back-ups should be a higher priority, perhaps with more frequent maintenance.
- Follow your maintenance schedule rigorously. Document date, time and location of maintenance, and retain the documentation. If there is a need to deviate from the prioritized maintenance schedule, document the reason why.
- Have a sewer mainline replacement priority plan approved by the governing body.

This list certainly does not address every aspect of sewer/wastewater risk management. For other risk management questions about sewer/waste water issues, contact a Risk Management Rep. or the Risk Services Department. Also, the WCIA Liability Resource Manual contains guidance on sewer operations; see **PWK.08. Wastewater/Sewer Operations** and **PWK.08.01 Sample Citizen Instructions for Sewer Back-Up Events**. The Liability Resource Manual is available through the Member Resources page on the WCIA website:
<https://www.wciapool.org/member-resources>.