

From The Mayor

November 4, 2016

In previous columns, I have mentioned how the average citizen pays little attention to what they can't see of underground infrastructure. Manholes and catch basins go somewhere but nobody really worries about where they go unless they don't work and back up.

The City of Warsaw is facing two major underground utility issues that can't be ignored any longer.

First, our sewage treatment plant is simply running out of room and will be unable to handle the increasing commercial and residential demand for service within the next 4 years. Our sanitary sewage treatment system went online 13 years ago and currently has the capacity to treat 4 million gallons a day (mgd). Fortunately it was designed to double its capacity to 8 mgd. But the estimated cost to expand to 6mgd is upwards of twenty million dollars.

Besides increased demand, another critical reason the plant is at its capacity is that there is storm water finding its way into the sanitary lines. This is called inflow and infiltration (I&I). This can occur for several reasons. Flaws in the system are exposed when it rains and storm water finds its way into the sanitary lines. Also, many residential drains have been connected to sanitary lines in the past and also contribute to the "clear water" that is unnecessarily treated and contributes to the capacity issue. Costs to identify and remedy I&I is in the millions of dollars.

The second problem is that a significant portion of those pipes that are "invisible" underground, are very old and have begun to fail. Twelve miles of sanitary sewer pipe that are part of an 85-mile network were laid down in the late 1800's. While those old brick or clay pipes for the most part still maintain their integrity, the problem is with the failure of the old mortar joints that connect them.

The heavy rains we experienced this summer put significant internal pressure on these failing joints that creates washout and eventual sinkholes in the roads. Several sinkholes occurred this summer. After investigation by our city engineer, the conclusion leaves us no choice but to repair the failing joints. Internally lining the pipe will seal the joints from the inside and can be done without tearing up the street. Staying ahead of the risk for major failures requires these repairs begin immediately. The cost will be over ten million dollars.

Long-term solutions to these issues require that the revenue from the utility fees must support bonds to make these improvements.

Sewage rates are established to pay for the operation and maintenance of our sewage treatment plant with its aging, intricate network of collection pipes, lift stations, and pumping station.

The monthly residential sewage rate (32.60) you have been paying is currently sufficient to cover all operational costs and debt service from previous plant construction and system improvements. The rates have remained level since 2008.

To solve the issues of aging infrastructure and capacity, it will be necessary to engineer the remedies and estimate their costs. Only then will we have the necessary information to determine how we will need to adjust rates to keep them sufficient to support the utility.