

Some Small Rural Communities Facing Big Problems



This 4-inch ductile iron pipe was one of several that were repaired in a small northeast Kansas community in January. The city has undertaken an assessment of their critical infrastructure. This pipeline had been leaking for some time and finally eroded to be losing approximately 120 gpm.

Many smaller towns and rural water districts in Kansas are facing similar problems – and some are significant. These smaller systems are faced with the issue of finding and retaining someone to take care of the water and wastewater systems. That’s someone to see to the daily operational chores and meet the requirements needed to be in compliance with drinking water and wastewater regulations. In most cases, these small systems do not have enough population base to generate enough revenue to support a full-time employee; in some cases, they can hardly afford to pay someone on a part-time basis.

The state requires water and wastewater systems to have certified operators. Although the person that is the certified operator for a system does not necessarily have to be the one personally attending to the daily work, the certified operator is ultimately responsible for the operations of the system. In some cases the mayor or a board/council member takes on the responsibility with very little compensation and usually not many “thank yous” given. Even though most people in a small community feel a responsibility to do their part, at some time in their life they realize that they can only work two or three jobs so long. Taking care of a water or waste water system is a very big responsibility and should not be taken lightly.

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Times have changed – and I think it’s time Kansas water and wastewater systems change accordingly. The costs for repairing, maintaining, and operating a system have increased. In many cases, the rates for water and sewer have not. The opinion that water should be inexpensive is going to be going, going, and gone. Those costs

will be even more expensive unless everyone begins to conserve and protect our water supplies. Water is no longer going to be free and plentiful; it’s going to be treated more and more as a commodity just as are electricity, natural gas, propane, etc. These are necessities and all have to be paid for.

One system I visited recently has not reviewed their rates for 15 years! That system has not had many problems but as equipment ages and deteriorates, the financial situation is pounding on their back doorstep. That community needs a major repair on its water storage tank; they also need to rehab a wastewater lift station. The town also has problems with sections of their wastewater collection system. The council and clerk are now in a panic trying to figure out what to do and how they are going to pay for it.

“Can we get a grant?”

Sure, there may be grants, but funding is not free. All funding, whether it is loans or grants, comes with some kind of cost. Agencies do not provide money for what would normally be considered as maintenance. There are many requirements associated with obtaining grants or loans for replacement of facilities. What also comes, often as a surprise to many communities and RWDs, is that to qualify for grant funding, the water or wastewater rates will be increased to a level that is more representative of the rates that are considered affordable. The system I am thinking of has increased the water rate from \$14.50 to \$29.50 just for the monthly minimum; the wastewater rate was increased from \$15 to \$20. Those are significant increases for people on fixed incomes and already tight budgets. The better approach for that community would have been to increase rates gradually over the years to now have the necessary funding to make the necessary repairs. Those incremental increases would not have jolted the customers such as they recently experienced. Regardless, systems need to be maintained and a simple review of rates at least every year or bi-annually is a simple and inexpensive way to stay informed as to the financial needs of the utilities.

There is no “one size-fits-all” approach that is appropriate. Each system is unique and each system can be operated and maintained in whatever manner best suits the local people. Each community has to make the choices how to deal with or adapt to situations. It is far better to have a plan. Today’s elected officials need to focus on making the situation better for the future.

Speaking of planning for the future, I encourage readers to attend the 2010 KRWA conference in Wichita, March 30 – April 1. Take a look at these sessions:

Tuesday, 3/30:

- ◆ Source Water Protection – Improving Water Quality

Wednesday, 3/31:

- ◆ You Have A Cross Connection Control Policy – Now What?
- ◆ Your City Or RWD KAN STEP Into Community Improvements
- ◆ Conserving Energy – Case Studies And Funding
- ◆ Utility Rate Setting: An Art, Science Or Just Politics?

Thursday, 4/1:

- ◆ What’s It Worth? Looking Longer Term For Real Value
- ◆ The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, and USDA Funding
- ◆ Water And Wastewater Management

Greg Metz joined KRWA as a Technical Assistant in July 2009. He previously worked at the city of Washington for 13 years where he was involved in city utilities including the power plant, streets, water and wastewater. He also served as purchasing agent for those utilities.



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