

SPOUTING OFF



A BLOG ABOUT WATER-RELATED ENVIRONMENTAL TOPICS
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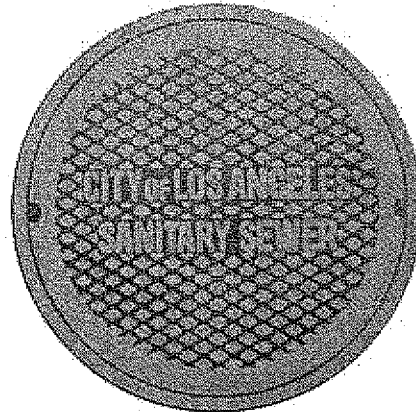


Go With The Flow

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Transparency has cost the Bureau of Sanitation.

About six months ago, the city of Los Angeles' Bureau of Sanitation (BoS) started setting up dozens of meetings with the public and the environmental community on the city's wastewater system upgrade plan and the need for a major increase in sewer service charges. After all, the BoS had frozen fee increases 14 out of the last 20 years. And it's held the line the last three years at height of the recession, but wastewater infrastructure waits for no one.



BoS sought to demonstrate that the sewer infrastructure and its four sewage treatment plants (Terminal Island, Glendale, Tillman and Hyperion) are in danger of falling apart. The deteriorating pipes and plants pose a significant risk to public health and safety. Emergency repairs on the infrastructure may cost the city infinitely more than replacing it. The delayed maintenance also exposes the city to costly litigation, enforcement and penalties.

Heal the Bay was founded in 1985 on the issue of decaying sewer infrastructure. Some Santa Monica Bay bottom-dwelling fish had tumors and fin rot, and there was a dead zone seven miles out in the middle of the Bay where Hyperion dumped its 1200+ tons of sludge every day. Also, million gallon sewage spills were commonplace.

After the city rebuilt Hyperion and major sections of the sewer infrastructure, the dead zone went away, the massive sewage spills decreased in frequency, and the Bay began to heal.

However, in the late 1990s, the frequency of sewage spills started to rise again. Then Santa Monica Baykeeper sued the city and the end result was an agreement to repair and replace much more of the sewer infrastructure. Just as important, the city ramped up its sewer inspection and repair program. The end result was a more than 80% drop in sewage spills. The days of students walking through raw sewage-filled streets on their way to school were a thing of the past.

Today, the BoS has proven to be a model agency when it comes to transparency, public engagement, fiscal management and infrastructure planning.

It is the lead agency that embraced stakeholder and community engagement for more than 10 years as part of the city's award-winning Water Integrated Resources Plan (IRP) and watershed-based, water quality compliance planning efforts. Also, the National Association of Cleanwater Agencies just bequeathed the BoS with its National Excellence in Management Award for its effective utility management practices.

Due to the recession, the city slowed its sewer capital improvement program – not only those improvements required as part of the Baykeeper settlement, but also the basic sewage treatment replacement projects needed for the city's four sewage treatment plants to efficiently function. The city's sewer service charges, in the bottom third of all rates for large cities across the nation, were just too low to keep L.A.'s sewer infrastructure functioning at a high level.

Cuts in total personnel, projects and maintenance are at the point that the consequences of increased sewage spills and dysfunctional sewage treatment plants are sure to increase to unacceptable levels once again. We've seen L.A. on this path and it isn't pretty or protective of public health and the aquatic environment.

I've sat through four presentations from BoS leaders on the need for sewer service charge increases. They made a compelling case for 10 years of 7% increases; a major increase to be sure, but a rate that was backed up by a list of approximately 150 basic sewer infrastructure and treatment plant improvements.

Believe me, BoS staff is willing to spend the time to go over the importance and cost estimates on nearly every one of the 150 projects. Much to the environmental community's dismay, the rate increase did not include upgrading Tillman and Glendale to microfiltration and reverse osmosis to finally move the city into the 21st century on water recycling.

Nor did the rate increases include stormwater capture projects – so essential to reducing L.A.'s runoff pollution, improving flood control, and augmenting local groundwater supplies. Unfortunately, water supply improvements strictly fall under the purview of LADWP, and its rate increase efforts have been delayed to 2012 at the earliest. So the end result is that the proposed sewer service charge increases are just for basic infrastructure repair and upgrades.

Despite the BoS focus on the basics, some members of the public and city council expressed concern about the size of the increases especially in the first few years. The BoS listened to the community and have adjusted the proposed rates especially in the first three years. Also, the rate increases are no longer 7% every year. The rate increases are now proposed at 4.5% in the first three years, and 6.5% for the additional seven years. At the end of the rate increases, L.A. still won't be in the top third of sewer service charges for major cities nationally.

Despite these changes and a continued willingness to meet with the public, the anti-tax crowd is attempting to blow up the rate increase plan.

They've even gone so far as accusing the BoS of following the LADWP rate increase approach, a ludicrous accusation in light of the fact that the BoS started meeting with the public a full three months before LADWP and has been engaged with the community as part of the IRP for over 11 years.

Also, unlike LADWP, the BoS provided the public and city council with a thorough accounting of the sewer system needs, including the list of projects, estimated costs, and approximate

timelines for completion. In short, the BoS provided the public with exactly the sort of transparency for which we've all been clamoring.

No one says that you have to like or support the proposed sewer service charge increase, but please give credit where credit is due: The BoS has provided the public and city council with transparency on how nearly all of the sewer service charge fee increases will be used.

Its leaders have made a compelling argument that we don't want to return to the days of ~~sewage on the streets and frequent beach closures.~~

Make no mistake, the proposed sewer service charge increases were reduced due to public and political pressure, not due to reduced sewer infrastructure needs. Infrastructure doesn't come cheap, but the cost of replacing failed infrastructure is a heck of a lot more expensive, and it comes at the expense of human health and aquatic life. The city council needs to act now to increase the sewer service charges so we never return to the 1980s and 1990s.