



Managing Wastewater Treatment Utilities Today

Thirty years ago, when many of our wastewater treatment plants were built, the focus for a facility manager was proficiency at treating wastewater. Federal and state governments paid most of the construction costs, and everyone was happy since these new facilities proved immediately effective at improving water quality. However, in many cases, few provisions were made for the future man-

agement of these facilities.

The future has arrived, with new challenges for facilities managers. Equipment needs upgrading or replacement, and costs for energy and employee benefits are skyrocketing. Treatment requirements have become more stringent. At the same time, less federal and state funding is available, and local budgets are tight. Experienced employees are retiring, and there are concerns about passing on their knowledge and skills to the next generation of wastewater professionals. The stakes are high for all of us; improper management of wastewater treatment facilities can lead to failures that endanger the health of New Yorkers and our environment.

Successfully meeting these management challenges is critical to the continued effective operation of wastewater treatment facilities. One way to do that is to move toward managing wastewater treatment facilities more like businesses. In many communities, water and sewer services have been underpriced for years—one cause of the financial challenges they face today. Under a business model, revenues would cover the cost of providing services, plus provide for future equipment replacement and facility expansion. An added benefit is that the public would be more aware of the actual costs of these services. Other business strategies such as asset management, accounting standards, and efficient purchasing methods can help facilities continue to operate effectively and efficiently in today's cost-cutting climate.

Management of human resources is also critical to the continued effective operation of facilities. There is concern about a possible "brain drain" posed by a coming wave of staff retirements. Managers hired in the boom years 30 years ago possess an extensive pool of knowledge about the systems they operate. The development of succession plans helps ensure that this knowledge is passed on to the next generation of system managers.

Finally, managers can be effective communicators and advocates for their facilities. They can help ratepayers and municipal officials recognize that water and sewer services fill a critical public health and economic need, and should be viewed as an investment rather than a liability.

Wearing all these hats is a daunting task for any manager, and we at the Department of Environmental Conservation want to help. We are expanding the training opportunities we offer to include these new skill sets. We are also working with NYWEA and other organiza-

tions to encourage young people to make wastewater treatment a career choice.

In order to protect public health and our environment, we all need to work together to ensure that our wastewater treatment facilities continue to operate efficiently and effectively. The economic realities of limited resources and the need for maximum operational efficiency are here to stay. Good business practices, human resource management, and communications—as well as good wastewater treatment management—will be critical to the continued effectiveness of our wastewater treatment facilities.

—Sandra L. Allen

Director of the NYSDEC Division of Water

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