

# Succession



by Jim Bower,  
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The topic on my mind is succession, and not the succession to the throne of some nondescript monarchy. I'm speaking of the policy that many communities should already have in place to answer the question: "How are we going to replace our retiring wastewater treatment plant operator or operators?" There are a finite number of licensed wastewater operators, and a large portion of them are reaching that magic thirty-year mark where they can retire. According to the informational DVD "The Rising Water" produced by NYRWA, in just five to seven years fifty percent of licensed wastewater operators will be eligible for retirement, and that is a substantial amount of experience and expertise to lose.

If a community that is close to having their operator retire opts to just advertise and entice a licensed operator from the pool of already employed licensed operators, then they have resolved their problem, but have likely created one for another community. The logical and most considerate answer is to institute a succession program to hire and train capable individuals to not only obtain their licenses, but to learn all of the idiosyncrasies of the facility they will be responsible for, and to learn from the individual whose responsibility it has been to maintain the compliance of that facility. The policy of succession is not cheap; the average cost to train an operator is \$12,000, a statistic also from "The Rising Water" DVD, and there is also the cost of having overlapping employees until the retiring operator leaves. But the mistakes that can happen when an inexperienced and unqualified person is suddenly left with the task of operating an unfamiliar wastewater treatment system can be dramatically more expensive to the community and the environment than the cost of the proper training.

A very practical way to institute a succession program is to begin with students hired as summer help, and offer training and full time employment as incentive to an individual that shows interest and the capability of becoming a wastewater operator. This sort of internship might be a welcome opportunity in this climate of economic downturn and in such a competitive job market.

The potential problem of this enormous gap in certified operators is looming large in the very near future. If it isn't addressed soon, numerous communities could find themselves seriously understaffed or, worse, without

anyone qualified to operate their wastewater facility. [I would gladly offer technical assistance to any municipality that would like to address the succession issue and develop a plan.]

Almost every corporation and organized community has at least a five year plan for development, and it would seem appropriate for communities to include a succession program for retiring employees such as wastewater operators in these plans. ●