

BEFORE YOU JUMP INTO ASSET MANAGEMENT....

By Steve Grimm

Simply put, sustainability means planning today to meet future needs. Sustainability is the ultimate goal. There are tools to help achieve that goal. Asset management plans are one such tool. They provide a roadmap for the sustainability of your system, from financial stability to the level of service you want to provide to your customers. This is often the first and, quite frankly, only path the regulators and consultants want you to take to help you achieve sustainability. Asset management plans are puzzles, with many pieces that all must fit together in order to make sense. But, I have said countless times before, I believe the first step should be to evaluate your current state of sustainability, or lack thereof. Identify your strengths and weaknesses in key management areas (puzzle pieces). Then the process of developing an asset management plan becomes easier and clearer. The pieces will begin to fit together. Now you're probably saying to yourself "hey, this sounds like that Workshop in a Box, sustainable management plan he's written about before"; you would be correct. I'm not going to bore you with a re-hash of how to develop those plans, rather I'm going to reinforce how one system, The Town of Essex, has started implementing their sustainable management plan.

In early 2016, the Town formed a sustainability committee to evaluate the sustainability of their wastewater infrastructure. In February 2017, the plan was completed and approved by the Town Board. The committee began implementing the plan, meeting quarterly to review progress. Stakeholder understanding and support (public relations) was one of the areas identified in the plan as a low performer. The committee discussed ways to better get their message to the customers. The committee decided a simple four question survey included on the quarterly water/sewer bill would be a good way to gauge customer knowledge/interest/expectations of the wastewater system. The response rate was about 25% to questions such as "Do you know where the money goes when you pay your water and sewer bill?" and "Do you know why your water and wastewater are treated?". The survey gave the committee valuable insight into customer knowledge and interest in the wastewater system and will be used in future decisions regarding the infrastructure. It was a good start for developing their level of service agreement.

Financial viability was another area that needed improvement. The Town used a basic equivalent dwelling unit (EDU) schedule for determining customer sewer charges. That schedule was very vague, classifying customers as single family, multi-family, small business, and large business. All customers in a category were assigned the same number of EDU's regardless of size. This had led to many customer complaints regarding their sewer charges. The committee decided to revise the EDU schedule to make it more equitable and understandable. NYRWA had been working with another system revising their EDU schedule and

had developed a draft EDU schedule that defined what an EDU was as well as a formula for calculating the EDU's that should be assigned to a customer. The committee began working on revising the EDU schedule in late 2019. Covid slowed, and at one point stopped, the ability of the committee to meet. Several virtual meetings were held, but those were not very productive. Finally, in February of 2021, in person committee meetings resumed. The committee developed several draft EDU schedules and addressed the questions associated with them. In August of this year, the final draft was reviewed and scheduled to be presented to the town board for approval. The new EDU schedule more evenly distributed sewer charges amongst customers. The proposed schedule clearly defined what an EDU was and assigned EDU's accordingly.

The sustainable management plans allow you to see where your strengths and weaknesses are and helps you develop a plan to improve your sustainability. These plans are made by you for you, not by someone else. They reflect your priorities and most importantly, are designed around your timeline. As you work on implementation of your plan the pieces will begin to fall into place, and then you will be in a better position to attempt the asset management plan. Interested? If so, please contact me at grimm@nyruralwater.org or 518-828-3155 ext. 180. Cheers! 💧💧💧



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