



Funds needed to improve and repair sewer systems; pay for rising costs at waste water treatment plants

COUNTY MAINTAINED DISTRICTS:

Burlingame Hills Sewer Maintenance District

Crystal Springs County Sanitation District

Devonshire County Sanitation District

Edgewood Sewer Maintenance District

Emerald Lake Heights Sewer Maintenance District

Fair Oaks Sewer Maintenance District

Harbor Industrial Sewer Maintenance District

Kensington Square Sewer Maintenance District

Oak Knoll Sewer Maintenance District

Scenic Heights County Sanitation District

Welcome to the first letter we hope will keep you informed about a critical health, safety and environmental issue in our community: the transportation and treatment of sewage. We face significant challenges in the months and years ahead due to aging sewers, increasing maintenance and repair costs and mandatory system improvements needed to comply with environmental regulations.



District crew cleaning sewer pipe

As a property owner in the Fair Oaks Sewer Maintenance District, the County of San Mateo manages your sewer system. Your sewage flows from the lateral that connects your house or business to pipes owned and maintained by the District to the City of Redwood City's sewer system, then to the South Bayside System Authority's treatment plant on the edge of the Bay.

Although the County is a separate political entity from the District, the Board of Supervisors serves as the District's governing board. On behalf of the District, County staff responds to emergencies, maintains pipes and assures compliance with strict environmental regulations to protect the water quality of the Bay.

Rate Increases Needed

The San Mateo County Board of Supervisors will soon be considering an adjustment to your sewer rates. Without adequate funding, the District will be unable to properly maintain the system and comply with federal and state environmental regulations.

We will notify you in the next few weeks when new, proposed rates are calculated. Rate increases are necessary to pay for repairs and replacement of aging sewers, increased maintenance costs, improved sewage treatment and to comply with regulatory requirements. An efficient sewer system minimizes the likelihood of sewer system backups and protects the environment, public health and marine and animal life.

Last year, some property owners voiced concern they were not given enough information about proposed rate increases or enough time to consider a number of issues. We hope you find this information and subsequent material helpful as your District, in cooperation with property owners, seeks a solution to the challenges ahead.

We also hope to use this forum to provide tips on how to preserve and protect your sewer system and, by extension, your pocketbook.

For more information, contact the Public Works Department at (650) 363-4100, between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. Monday through Friday, or go to www.co.sanmateo.ca.us/sewers

Aging Sewers

Several of the sewer/sanitation districts managed by the County have sewer lines that were installed decades ago. Some of these sewer pipes have cracks. Earth movement, age or roots, which bore into even the smallest holes and over time can cause significant damage to sewer pipes. Similar problems exist in the city or town sewer systems that connect your district's facilities to the wastewater treatment plant. The sewers in your district and in the downstream cities and towns may need major repairs or replacement.

Cracks allow rainwater and groundwater to seep into the sewer pipes. This extra water overloads the system, especially during heavy rains, and can cause overflows into creeks, storm drains and the Bay wherever sewer pipes cannot handle the volume.

Any overflow of untreated wastewater is a hazard to public health and the environment. The District could be subject to stiff fines from state and federal regulatory agencies if raw sewage repeatedly overflows from the system.

Preventive Maintenance

To prevent problems, the District performs routine maintenance to keep the raw sewage flowing and prevent sewer overflows. The District cleans pipes, removes roots and grease, and responds to emergency overflows and backups.

A clean environment without sewer overflows is important to all of us. Tens of millions of gallons of treated wastewater flow into San Francisco Bay each day. A major factor in maintaining the health of the Bay and our community is containing raw sewage in the sewer system.

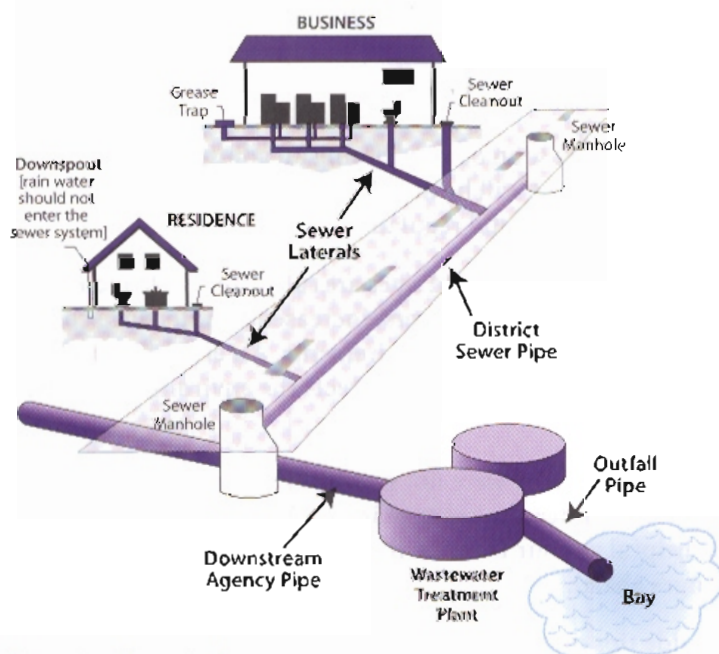


Image #1 – Schematic of a sewer system

Tolls Must Be Paid

Once sewage leaves the District's pipes, a toll must be paid at each step before treated wastewater is released in the Bay. Your bill for sewage service includes a share that the District pays to all other agencies that handle the flow. Like your District, the other "downstream" agencies need funds to improve and protect their pipes and their treatment plants. See Image #1.

Treatment Plant Upgrades

Treatment plants along the Bay – and throughout California – are being improved to help ensure a cleaner environment. The improvements include replacing old equipment, installing new, more effective processing technology and increasing capacity to prevent untreated water from flowing into the Bay. These improvements are necessary to meet water quality standards set by state and federal regulatory agencies.

The South Bayside System Authority's (SBSA) treatment plant treats sewage from your area. The plant treats about 29 million gallons of sewage per day from 200,000 people and businesses.

The SBSA is proposing to implement a multi-million dollar capital improvement program to rehabilitate and upgrade the treatment plant during the next 10 years. Your District will be required to help pay for these improvements since sewage from the District is treated at the SBSA treatment plant. SBSA anticipates notifying the District with detailed information in the near future about the cost implications to the District.

Fines and Penalties for Discharge Permit Violations

All Bay Area sewer collection systems and treatment plants operate under regulations/permits issued by the San Francisco Bay Regional Water Quality Control Board, by authority of the federal Environmental Protection Agency. These discharge permits specify operating conditions, including strict requirements on the quality of water that is discharged into the Bay.

Districts are subject to fines and lawsuits if environmental-protection regulations are not met. Recent lawsuits brought by environmental groups against the City of Richmond and West County Water District resulted in more than \$1 million in legal fees. The San Francisco Bay Regional Water Quality Control Board in 2006 fined the City of South San Francisco \$516,000 for sewer overflows and levied a \$626,000 administrative civil liability against the City and County of San Francisco for discharging 475,000 gallons of raw sewage onto the Great Highway and Ocean Beach. Preventative maintenance of sewers and upgrades to treatment plants help prevent fines and lawsuits.



Fees Pay For Service

Sewage service may be nearly invisible to most residents, but the costs of improving and maintaining the system will not go away or be borne by others. Only funds from your District, not the County's general fund, can be used to pay for sewer service.

All of the money collected from any increases in sewer fees will go toward, maintenance, improvements to the sewer system, treatment costs, sanitary sewer management planning and out-of-district capital improvements.

The money for improvements can only come from users of the sewer service. Money cannot come from general taxes or other revenues that are already needed for other vital services.

The charges for sewer service appear on your property tax bill because that is the least costly way for the District to collect the charges. However, they are not a tax. They are a fee for service similar to other utilities such as PG&E. The charges are a fee that pays for the actual costs of sewer operation, maintenance, construction, treatment and wastewater disposal.



Get Involved

The tentative timeline for setting the new sewer service charge rates is as follows:

May 15, 2007	The District will provide the Board of Supervisors with a status update on the proposed sewer service charge rates and will seek the Board's approval of rate setting process and the components that are considered in the determination of the rates.
May 2007	Evening public meetings will be held with property owners and associations to discuss the proposed rates and how the rates were determined, and to obtain property owner input.
June 5, 2007	The Board of Supervisors will consider an ordinance which includes new sewer service charge rates, and will schedule a time and place for the public hearing to set the rates and impose the charges.
July 24, 2007	The Board of Supervisors will hold a public hearing and consider the ordinance setting sewer service charge rates and imposing sewer service charges for each district for the upcoming year.



Stay Informed

You will receive official notification of the proposed rate increase when it has been calculated. A public hearing will then be scheduled before the Board of Supervisors.

Protests against the proposal are possible and the process will be outlined in a subsequent letter to property owners. If written protests against the proposed increases are presented by a majority of owners, the increase will not be approved by the Board of Supervisors. However, the need to upgrade and repair the sewage systems will not go away. The Department of Public Works will recommend that expenditures be prioritized within the existing fee collected and that they report back to the Board of Supervisors on options for managing or transferring the District's operations due to insufficient funding to meet state mandates.



Keep It Clean

As a property owner and ratepayer, you can take many actions that will not only help keep San Mateo County and San Francisco Bay clean but also help minimize your sewage fee increases. For starters, think FOG: fats, oils and grease. See Image #2.

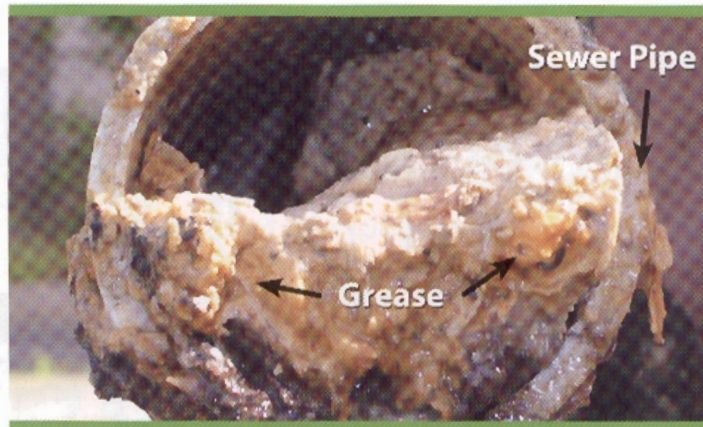


Image #2 – Grease inside of sewer pipe

Fats, oils, and grease (FOG) aren't just bad for your arteries, they are also bad for sewer pipes. One of the causes of overflows is a blocked pipe. FOG gets into the pipes when washed down drains from kitchen sinks and poorly maintained grease traps.

FOG sticks to the insides of sewer laterals and sewer pipes. These overflow culprits are commonly found in lard, cooking scraps, dairy products and meats. For the sake of your own wallet, don't put these down the drain.

Another hidden culprit is plant and tree roots. Hair-like roots can get inside the sewer pipes through small cracks or openings. Once inside, roots have an ideal environment to grow. Large root masses can cause sewage to back up in the lateral – the pipe from your home or business that connects to the sewer pipe in the street or easement – and likely overflow at the lowest point in your home. Similar problems also occur in the District-owned sewer pipes.

See Image #3.

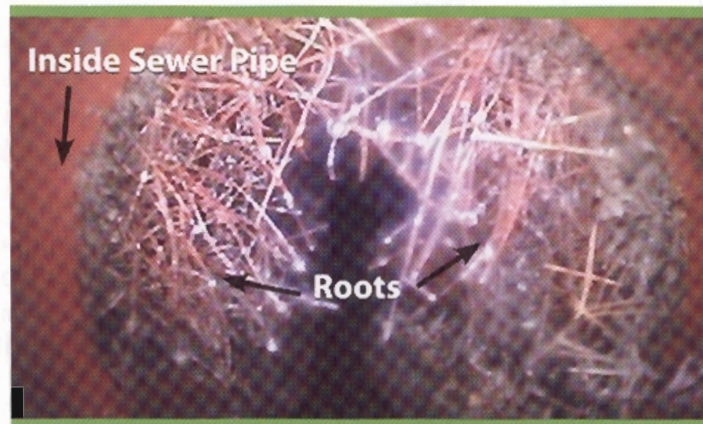


Image #3 – Roots partially blocking sewer pipe

(Keep it Clean, continued)

To avoid these problems, find the lateral (tips are available on-line at www.sewersmart.org). Avoid planting trees or shrubs above or close to the lateral. Residents can also help by planting trees and shrubs with deep roots rather than plants with shallow roots that fan out in search of easy sources of water.

Flows to Bay

Don't dump toxic or hazardous materials down the drain. Whatever goes down the sewer pipes end up at a treatment plant and eventually in the Bay.

Treatment plants are not designed to remove certain kinds of chemicals, metals, and pharmaceuticals. Toxic or hazardous materials dumped or rinsed down household drains pass through the plant untreated and end up in the Bay. Marine life and human health are threatened when this occurs.

In addition, toxic or hazardous materials can kill the living microorganisms that treatment plants need to breakdown sewage.

Sewers and Storm Drains **Crucial Differences**

A sanitary sewer system collects wastewater from homes and businesses. The sewage travels to a wastewater treatment plant, where it undergoes treatment before it is discharged into the environment.

A storm drain system collects rain run-off from streets, parking lots and roofs. The water typically flows straight into the Bay, creek, river or ocean without any treatment.

During a storm, rainwater and groundwater enter sewer systems through cracks in pipes or through illegal connections of downspouts or yard-drains, adding flow and overloading the sewer system. Sewers may then overflow into streets, where raw sewage flows into the storm drain system and straight into the environment without undergoing treatment.

Addition of rainwater or groundwater into sewers can lead to sewage treatment plants becoming overwhelmed with three times or more of the normal flow which can exceed the plant's sewage treatment capacity. This may result in premature releases of sewage before treatment is complete.

Regulatory agencies may levy fines if sewage from a sewer system or treatment plant is released into the environment.

Neither sewer systems nor storm drains are designed to handle oil, grease or garbage. All may clog sewers and storm drains and lead to overflows.

Important Information Regarding the Sewer/Sanitation District Serving Your Property!

Para obtener una
copia de este folleto en
Español, favor de llamar
al (650) 599-1443

County of San Mateo
Department of Public Works
555 County Center, 5th Floor
Redwood City, CA 94063-1665

