



RESOURCES FOR RURAL WATER & WASTEWATER UTILITIES

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NYRWA has been consistently encouraging all municipal systems that we work with to become more sustainable over the past several years. We have been utilizing the “Sustainable Utility Management” workshop materials to help systems identify their key management areas that need improvement. Often, financial viability is the key management area in need of the most improvement. Along with financial viability, I believe development of a comprehensive plan, a capital improvements program, and succession planning are necessary for municipalities to achieve success in sustainable management of their systems. Development of a comprehensive plan will guide a municipality with establishing goals and allow them to focus on immediate and long-term community growth and preservation or development of a communities assets.

COMPREHENSIVE PLAN DEVELOPMENT

Identifying the major issues of comprehensive planning will allow the utility to focus on protecting the health and safety of the community’s citizens by providing safe, clean, reliable drinking water, or ensuring that wastewater effluent discharged into receiving waters meets or exceeds regulatory standards. Inventorying assets and evaluating the current operational conditions will serve as a foundation to asset management. Goals and policies can be adjusted based on the information gathered. Plan development can take on the characteristics of a web document, a short strategic document, or something more comprehensive with details and background information. The plan, goals, and priorities should be reviewed by a governing board. Public review is highly encouraged. Once the comprehensive plan has been reviewed and adopted, it will then be necessary to develop the specific course of action which will promote the concepts outlined in the comprehensive plan.

CAPITAL IMPROVEMENTS PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

A capital improvements program consists of two major components; the capital plan and the capital budget. The task of maintaining a significant portion of public infrastructure such as drinking water and wastewater treatment systems, including the distribution and collection systems falls on the local municipalities. Establishing a multi - year capital improvements program, CIP is crucial to affording and maintaining these essential public services. Hand in hand, the capital budget flows from the capital

plan and details the way in which the municipality will project their key financial variables on their proposed capital projects and how they intend to finance them.

Creation of a CIP provides a link between a municipality and other local government entities, school districts, parks, etc. Working together and involving the public demonstrates fiscal responsibility and transparency in utilizing public funds. The capital budget differs from the annual budget in that it projects anticipated revenues and expenditures for long term projects which helps to lessen the burden of large expenditures.

SUCCESSION PLANNING

Another crucial component of a sustainable utility is succession planning. Water and wastewater system operations specialists possess years of experience and institutional knowledge that is often lost upon their retirement. Recruitment, selection, mentoring, cross training, and professional development are all effective means to ensure the seamless transition of responsibilities and key operational knowledge and procedures. A retention strategy is a major consideration, as small rural systems are frequently burned when a new employee completes their requisite training and then resigns to pursue greener pastures. Development of a succession plan will require up-to-date job descriptions, employee statistics, and may contain training and development strategies for relevant leadership positions.

USDA Rural Development has supported the creation of many useful resources to assist municipalities with their efforts to become more sustainable. Available to all, are a series of guidebooks created by Syracuse University Environmental Finance Center intended to aid local officials in understanding each of the above topics, as well as planning board operation, and the grant writing process. These informative guidebooks and more can be found at your local USDA Rural Development office.



There is a popular axiom that appropriately sums up sustainability planning: “Failing to plan is planning to fail” 💧💧💧