



"YOU FLUSHED WHAT?"

Jake Gardner | Energy Efficiency Circuit Rider

Change is inevitable, we can only control how we react to it. Unfortunately, the last couple months have been marked by unprecedented amounts of forced change. The Coronavirus outbreak in the United States has led to much of New York State being "put on pause". Bars and restaurants have been shut down, religious services have been postponed, gatherings of any kind have been canceled, and workers across the state have been forced to learn to work from home while dealing with the added stresses and fears that this pandemic has brought. Even in the most essential industry, water and wastewater, operators are being forced to adjust to staggered schedules and get creative as supply chains are strained.

In energy efficiency I care about the numbers. I focus on how much water you are treating and how much energy it takes to treat that volume of water. It is going to be interesting to see how "New York on Pause" affects treatment volumes. I'm curious to see if families being at home all day will lead to increased water consumption through longer showers, more frequent dishwashing, more home cooking, and constant disinfection. I'm also interested to see how these changes will impact how our wastewater systems perform; will more cooking lead to more grease being improperly sent down drains and what will people flush when they run out of toilet paper?

Panic buying is a psychological reaction to fear. You can create a feeling of safety when you stockpile the items you think you may need. You can't control what's going on around you, but you can control your immediate surroundings. This isn't the first time this form of nesting has happened. If we think back to the days of Y2K, we all know someone that stockpiled shelf stable meals, batteries, paper goods, fuel, and generators. The difference between then and now is the time frame that these stockpiles were curated. There was a gentle build up to Y2K while Covid-19 panic purchasing happened in a very short time. This has put a severe strain on some of our supply networks.

As of April 1st, the deadline for this issue's articles, it has been a full month since I have seen toilet paper on store shelves in New York's Capital Region. Granted, I have only been to the store three times, but it is alarming to see all those empty shelves. I have a reasonable amount because I shop paper products quarterly, but plenty of people do not and are unable to purchase wastewater system safe bath tissue. It begs the question, what will people start flushing?

A household running out of toilet paper is a concerning issue: not only for the household, but for the wastewater system that serves them. If people in mass start using and flushing paper towels, baby



Lyndonville's wall of flushed items.

wipes, or napkins there could be clogging issues in collection systems and intake structures. There are ways to work around a personal toilet paper shortage, but the answers are not always popular or good for public health and the environment.

The first that comes to mind are the other paper products like paper towels, tissues, and even baby wipes. We all know how terrible these are for wastewater systems, but many of your customers may not. It is important that these replacement papers are disposed of in the trash. Another option is to clean yourself with a wet washcloth: rinse, repeat, and sanitize the cloth. And a last-ditch option could be to just hop in the shower.

One of the best, but less readily available options is the bidet. This centuries old French invention never really became popular in the UK, and as a result, never became popular in the United States. And I know what you're thinking, because I'm thinking the same thing too, "I'm an American. I work hard, I provide for my family, and I use toilet paper."

I have never used a bidet, but desperate times call for desperate measures and I won't lie about having a \$30 bidet conversion kit hanging around in my Amazon shopping cart. I don't think this crisis will be the turning point for the bidet's popularity in America, but I once heard an argument for them that went like this: "If your hands or face were dirty you would clean them with warm water and soap, why would you treat the rest of my body any different?"

I have had to rethink every facet of my life the last month, why shouldn't I also rethink my bathroom routines?

This is a time of change and a time to: stay home, stay healthy, and call our loved ones. This is also a time to remind our communities of what they should and shouldn't be flushing. Reaching out to your community through mass notification and social/print media will go a long way. Providing customers with options before they need them will alleviate some of the panic when their final roll has given its last sheet. It will also let them know that you are still there, still working, and still have their back when they turn a faucet or flush a toilet. 💧💧