



## SUSTAINABLE UTILITY MANAGEMENT USING WORKSHOP IN A BOX

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Sustainable system management. It seems many are talking about it. But what does it mean? How do you achieve it? Simply put, a sustainable system provides a desired level of service to its customers at a fair and reasonable cost. So many municipalities with water infrastructure are facing challenges to their sustainable livelihood. How they got to this point is not really that important. What is of importance is how they approach the sustainability issue and the steps they take to improve overall system sustainability. There are many ways to achieve a sustainable system, one of which is by using the Rural and Small Systems Guidebook to Sustainable Utility Management, aka "Workshop in a Box" (WIAB). Used in conjunction with a committee approach, the WIAB process can be used to evaluate a systems performance in ten key management areas as well as, to aid in developing and implementing a plan to improve lower performance areas.

The first, and admittedly most difficult step in the process, is to find an interested, willing and enthusiastic system. Easier said than done. It may take upwards of a year of repeat visits and lobbying the elected officials before a system finally decides to move forward. The end result is well worth all the time and effort put into convincing the elected officials to move forward with developing the plan.

Once an interested system is found, the next step is to create a sustainability committee. The committee should consist of the New York Rural Water Association (NYRWA) as facilitator, the chief elected official (Mayor, Town Supervisor), the Village or Town Clerk, an additional board member, the treatment plant Chief Operator and lastly, two district residents. The last two members of this committee are critical to the success of the process. These members represent the public, the people who will ultimately support and fund the utility. These members are valuable assets to the committee. They bring the concerns and comments of the other district residents to the table. They can also be your biggest advocates. These members can inform their peers of the issues facing the utility and what is being done to improve performance without being seen as an elected official.

The first committee meeting (kickoff meeting) is a general informational meeting. Future meetings are scheduled (once a month for no more than two hours), goals are discussed and the WIAB process explained. At the end of the meeting the committee members are given their first homework assignment.

In preparation for the next meeting each member is to complete the self assessment worksheet. The members are encouraged to complete the self assessment as individuals, not as a group. Individual opinions to the ten key management areas are the goal.

At the next meeting, the completed self-assessment worksheets are discussed. Don't be surprised if what you expect to take about an hour takes almost the entire two hour meeting, possibly more. A lively discussion of the individual committee member's ratings and rankings of the ten key management areas is what leads to a master assessment sheet, the basis for the sustainability plan development.

Once the self assessment worksheets have been discussed and a master assessment sheet developed, the key management areas with the lowest performance ratings can be addressed. An improvements worksheet is used to document the reasons why the management area was rated as low performing and what would be needed to achieve high performance. Potential challenges that may be encountered as well as changes the utility would need to make are also identified.

The final step in the process is developing the draft system management improvement plan. Using the information from the improvements worksheets, a specific improvement action plan for the key management area to be addressed is developed. This plan outlines the action(s) to be conducted as well as the objectives that action will address. Timelines and milestone benchmarks are established and a review process to track progress is initiated. The draft system management improvement plan is then presented to the municipal board for approval. Once approved, the plan is ready to be implemented.

The process to develop a system management improvement plan typically takes between 8 and 10 meetings. Utilizing the forms and guidance provided in the WIAB program makes this a relatively easy process and the end result is a plan, developed BY the utility, FOR the utility, that is easy to understand and implement.

The New York Rural Water Association (NYRWA) has been using the WIAB in conjunction with the committee approach for over two years. Three wastewater systems have developed and begun to implement system management improvement plans, and a fourth has recently started the process. In all four instances, committee members all had similar reservations going into the kickoff meeting and completing the self evaluation worksheet. The elected official and board member didn't know anything >>>

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about treatment. The residents of the sewer district didn't know anything about treatment or internal affairs. Each member was unsure of their effectiveness on the committee. The NYRWA facilitator explained that it was their opinion on a key management area that mattered, not necessarily their complete knowledge. If after reading the WIAB guidance material they were still unsure, they were advised to leave it blank. At the next meeting, when the members began discussing the self evaluation, those that were unsure began to understand, and their opinions and comments were incorporated into the process and eventual plan.

In another instance, a sewer district resident committee member was commenting on how much he was paying for sewer service. Several meetings later that same member stated "We haven't been funding this thing properly since day one!" That was a huge breakthrough. That member became a major advocate for the utility and was able to reach other sewer district residents in a way that an elected official couldn't.

That is the benefit of using a committee approach. Each committee member's opinion is heard, discussed and incorporated into the improvement plan. It truly is a system management improvement plan developed by the utility, for the utility.

For more information on the committee approach to sustainable utility management using the WIAB process, contact New York Rural Water Association Wastewater Technician Steve Grimm at (518) 828-3155. 💧💧