A SUSTAINABILITY STRATEGY WORTH TALKING ABOUT

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The New York Rural Water Association has now added Sustainability for Water and Wastewater System training to this year's agenda. During the first seminar, it was clear that the participants were enthusiastic about sharing and exchanging ideologies of management, their success, and their faults, in an effort to identify new ways to address core issues regarding water and wastewater system sustainability. Group discussions were organized to expand upon the ten key management areas which were highlighted in our summer issue of Aquafacts, titled "Workshop-in-a-Box", (available online at our website www.nyruralwater.org under the Resources drop down menu). Attendees were encouraged to perform a self-assessment of their system and then share with the group what they do, specifically, that makes them successful in ensuring that their water and/or wastewater utility is utilizing personnel, equipment, and financial resources most efficiently. Also during the training session, participants discussed incorporating tools such as asset management, water use planning, and financial planning into their individual system's management practices. Thereby learning new strategies that can be used to position their community and resources to better achieve future service demands and regulatory requirements, and to provide for long-term sustainability.

After the first seminar, a new focus has been undertaken to direct our efforts to helping the rural systems across the State to achieve greater success in this endeavor. It is a well known benefit of the New York Rural Water Association membership that networking at training sessions and the annual technical conference, has saved immeasurable time and monies for many. Just by coming together and discussing process problems/ solutions, and equipment and instrument experiences; what works, and what doesn't, has always been encouraged at our training sessions. In my travels, I find that it is a certain kind of perk for me to be able to discuss with operations specialists how they solved a particular problem, and then be able to share that positive experience with others in different parts of the State. Other systems, that due to distance, may never have the opportunity to learn from each other, otherwise.

Working toward asset management and successfully tackling a few of the 10 key management areas, brings me to a recent discussion that I had while sitting down with the Superintendent for the Village of Champlain, N.Y. Although they have not yet participated in our sustainability workshop, they are well on their way to meeting the needs of future service demands and adopting successful strategies that will position their community and resources for long-term sustainability.

Mike Jolicoeur, Superintendent for the Village of Champlain, was very willing to describe how the village mayor, trustees, and village employees all come together in a joint effort to ensure that the village residents get the best possible service in an economical, safe and professional manner. How do they do it? The answer is multi-faceted and I will try to briefly highlight a few of the 10 key management areas that they are excelling in.

CUSTOMER SATISFACTION

They put a great deal of importance on customer satisfaction. It is a proven fact that a customer's satisfaction level is directly influenced by the timeliness in which their water service is restored. Planning for such events as a water break or leak is incredibly difficult to do. Having the necessary parts and pipe in stock is a challenge for every municipality. Having access to expedient delivery service in times of need can be a big unknown, a variable that can greatly diminish customer satisfaction in a hurry. The Village of Champlain has eliminated that "unknown" by participating in a unique program offered by E.J. Prescott called Value Added Service, (V.A.S.), Mr. Jolicoeur described how this program has saved the village time and money on numerous occasions over the course of the last year. Established by E.J. Prescott, the V.A.S. provides the member system with the power to tighten the control on budgetary inventory expenses, and get what is needed, when it is needed. The goal is to remove the burden of stockpiling inventory for unexpected events that may or may not occur. The utility capitalizes on EJP's distribution inventory; local, regional, and beyond, to receive timely delivery of products and services.

INFRASTRUCTURE STABILITY

By participating with the V.A.S. program team, parts delivery and workforce services are aligned to achieve greater success in infrastructure stability. Improving outcomes in yet another of the 10 key management areas that focuses on repair and/or replacement of infrastructure and key assets. Mr. Jolicoeur >>>

described a particular water leak that he had to deal with this past winter. Faced with a rather large water loss situation, he called on the assistance of the New York Rural Water Association Water Circuit Riders who helped him find the location of the leak. He also called his local EJP rep, who arrived onsite prior to breaking ground, and arranged for a dedicated responder to be on standby to be available to deliver anything they needed. In this case, the items came within two hours from Burlington, VT.

PRODUCT QUALITY

Mr. Jolicoeur and the wastewater operations specialist, Woody Kissel, described a situation that happened last winter during the worst, bitter cold conditions in which a return activated sludge line, that was made of ductile iron, split open at an eight inch tee. With a phone call, the EJP V.A.S. team drove a replacement tee and an eight inch valve all the way from Massachusetts, not only within 24 hours, but also during a severe winter snow storm. Being able to install the ductile iron tee and the eight inch valve within 24 hours meant that the wastewater treatment plant process was maintained and a process upset was avoided. Another key management area, Product Quality, and in this case effluent quality, was preserved and maintained. The system remained in compliance and the village, once again, reliably met the customer, public health and ecological needs of their community.

I asked Mr. Jolicoeur what he felt was the best part of the V.A.S. program that helped him the most in his job. He said the inventory management system. The V.A.S. team set up and established an inventory stock spare parts list. "Whatever Champlain keeps in stock, EJP keeps in stock". "They (EJP) can see what is used and will call me to reorder when the level reaches an agreed upon set-point". He said there are times that things get real hectic and things get forgotten when it comes time to keeping track of items used to fix a problem. Sometimes it seems like there is one problem after another. The V.A.S. program eliminates the little forgotten things and keeps track of the inventory.

He also compared the program to what he calls "shared services". As a V.A.S. member, you become part of a network of inventory with other V.A.S. members. So, if another nearby V.A.S. community needs a part and you have that which is needed, your inventory (with your approval), can be used to fulfill their immediate need and your item(s) will be replaced within reasonable time frames, and vice versa. "If a town or neighboring community needs something, we share what we can to help each other out - shared services". The Village of Champlain actively works with the Town of Champlain under a Memorandum of Understanding. "We are small. We don't have the resources that other/larger systems have. Knowing what you have available for projects is extremely useful in making resource decisions for budgeting. When I am project planning, I know what my materials will cost, because as a V.A.S. member, my prices are set each year and don't fluctuate with the market, except certain commodities". "EJP has even lowered some prices this year when they received a discounted price from their supplier, however, they guarantee that they will not raise the price for that year". Their prices are competitive and the freight is included, no hidden extra charges.

"I just recently had some surplus inventory that we were not going to use, and they took it back from us with no restock fee and gave us full credit for the items".

EMPLOYEE & LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

I asked Mr. Jolicoeur if he had considered any of the commercially available software for asset management and equipment inventory, and he said there is no comparison. If he had purchased a software program, he would be a stand alone entity. What he had for inventory would be all that he had and nothing more. And the expense of such software is cost prohibitive for such a small village. Participating with the V.A.S. program, he has access to the vast resources of EJP and other V.A.S. members without the financial burden of stockpiled inventory. He also said that EJP provided a 10 hour OSHA construction safety course as part of the V.A.S. program and was encouraged to invite the town employees and another local community as well, free of charge. And that they are welcome to attend any training that EJP sponsors at no cost. This commitment to training is an important attribute of another key management area, Employee & Leadership Development. The Village is excelling in this management area through the V.A.S. program by cultivating competent, motivated, and safe-working employees.

It struck me that everything Mr. Jolicoeur had been describing, this whole Value Added Service concept, is a tremendous opportunity for other rural water and wastewater systems to achieve a higher degree of success. By applying several of the attributes that are practiced by the Village of Champlain and other successful systems in their ability to deliver efficient, economical, and premium quality services to their customers with the highest levels of competence and professionalism. I felt compelled to "network" the Village of Champlain's successful sustainability strategy in these key management areas. I am anxious to hear from our other member systems and would be pleased to sit down and discuss the 10 key management areas, and learn from and share success strategies, to help guide your system towards long-term sustainability.