

Municipalities want to help businesses, not punish them

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Most people don't think about where the water goes as it flows down the drain — out of sight, out of mind. The problem is that what goes into the sewer system can affect the plumbing down the line, the wastewater treatment plant and rivers that are downstream.

"When people think of the sewer, they think you can put (anything) down, and it magically disappears," said Karen Dancho, pretreatment coordinator for the City of Bethlehem's Department of Water and Sewer Resources. "If it's not something good, you shouldn't put it down the drain."

Dancho is co-vice president of the Pretreatment Information Exchange (PIX), a nonprofit watershed organization. James G. Houstoun, a president of PIX and a pretreatment coordinator for the Borough of Catasauqua Wastewater Treatment Plant, started PIX several years in response to a suggestion by the federal Department of Environmental Protection to educate the community and businesses about wastewater treatment.

Houstoun said the municipalities have an interest in regulatory compliance, but "our objective is not to enforce if we can ask somebody to do it voluntarily."

PIX is a consortium of pretreatment personnel from the Allentown, Bethlehem, Catasauqua and Easton and non-regulatory professionals who seek "to bring municipalities, discharging businesses, regulators, environmental organizations, and concerned citizens together to better protect our watersheds," according to an organization statement.

Tori Morgan, pretreatment coordinator for the Easton Area Joint Sewer Authority/United Water and co-vice president of PIX, said, "We don't want to be viewed as just regulators. We don't want to put people out of business. Our goal is to bring people together who are working toward a common goal."

"We help the companies who discharge to discharge intelligently," Houstoun said.

In an effort to assist companies that have a wastewater discharge problem, the municipal wastewater departments try to connect these companies with those who have solved a similar problem.

"We try to point people in the right direction for a solution," Morgan said.

Dancho said, "Sometimes (companies) will feel more comfortable working with another company," than with the municipalities.

"If you have to call your treatment coordinator, level with them," Dancho said.

"Tell them 'we didn't know'. That's good. When we go out and we find the problem, that's bad."

Dancho explained that new regulations come out all of time and unless a company

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has an environmental department, it might not be aware of some of the dos and don'ts of wastewater disposal.

For instance, she said, grease is a big problem. Dancho said too often grease from restaurants, hotels and houses gets washed down the drain instead of collected in a container and thrown into the garbage.

"It might not block right in front of their business, but it might down the line," she said. As grease cools, it solidifies. A clogged sewer line can cause it to overflow, which becomes a health hazard, Dancho explained.

Other problem substances are hazardous

materials like kerosene, pharmaceuticals, and industrial agents such as cyanide used in electroplating. Some chemicals just shouldn't mix together.

"Treatment plants are not designed to handle a large variety of chemicals," Dancho said. "Some chemicals can kill the biologicals." These are microorganisms such as bacteria that occur naturally and break down the waste, she explained.

When a person disposes of a small amount of the waste, it may not seem like much, but "when you have 10,000 people thinking that, you have trouble. You really don't want to wipe out a treatment plant."

Tori Morgan explained that these microorganisms run a wastewater treatment plant. The only difference between nature and the treatment facility is that the process is nurtured at the facility.

"It's like nature on steroids," she said.

At the facility, employees make sure conditions are fine-tuned and perfect for the organisms to work by giving them enough food (the waste) and air that is kept "bubbling and turbulating," she said.

People don't realize that "there is no new water," Morgan said. The water is just continually purified and returns to the natural cycle of evaporation and rain.

"You have to take care of it," she said. "If you muddy it up too much, that's it."