

Published in the *Onsite Journal* Vol 13, No. 5. (2004) by the National Onsite Wastewater Recycling Association (NOWRA).

Wastewater Management Ideas for Successful Homeowner Associations **Ryan C. Brandt**

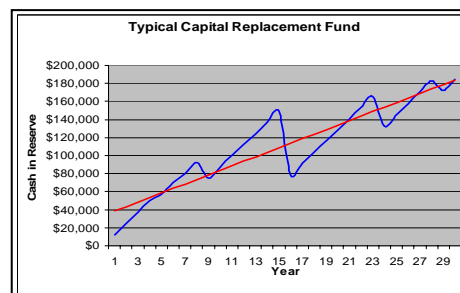
What does it mean to manage wastewater? To people in the wastewater industry, it means to supervise the day-to-day operations of a wastewater facility along with planning for the future. To a Homeowners Association (HOA) the definition of management may be quite different. It may be as limiting as only establishing a budget for day-to-day operations while inadvertently omitting financial planning for the future of the system. Wastewater management can make or break a HOA. Up to 90% of the typical HOA budget is allocated to wastewater management.

Without proper management and future planning, the best design and construction of a wastewater system is irrelevant. Unfortunately proper management is not being consistently implemented among Homeowners Associations. As development occurs and new wastewater technologies are approved, there appears to be a lag of time before management entities are able to catch up with what actually needs to be done to maintain their wastewater resources. This learning curve ends up giving clustered on-site wastewater systems, new technology and innovative zoning practices a bad name.

Homeowner Associations are one method of managing wastewater systems. Other entities include Environmental Subordinate Service Districts (ESSD), Sanitary Districts, and utility management. Each management entity has its own pros and cons. However, Homeowner Associations are particularly susceptible to poor management due to a lack of communication from engineer to developer, developer to attorneys writing bylaws and eventually to the Homeowner Associations. Currently there is a disconnect between the Homeowner Association and the engineer, which is where a strong bond needs to be maintained. This disconnect prevents the Homeowners Association from truly understanding their wastewater system and the needs that are involved for future management.

As professionals in the industry, we must take action now to educate, inform and support the creation of responsible management entities. This article focuses on the top 5 wastewater management ideas for Homeowner Associations to implement in order to manage their wastewater resources properly. These ideas are described below:

1. **Develop a Long-Term Financial Plan** – The HOA is ultimately responsible for fiscal management of the wastewater system. Four categories should be included in the annual budget. These include: 1) monitoring costs; 2) operation costs; 3) maintenance costs; and most importantly 4) capital replacement costs. The first three categories typically include those costs of running the wastewater system on a daily basis. The final category, capital replacement costs includes the need for fees to be collected and reserved in an interest bearing account and used as parts of the system need to be replaced. HOA's should be encouraged to meet with the engineer or the previous owner. In this meeting information should be



obtained on the installation costs of the system and a plan developed to provide capital replacement over the design life of the system. Developing a long term financial plan is the single most important element for the future. Establishing a successful financial plan makes all users of the system invest in the replacement a little at a time and minimizes costly future assessments.

2. **Understand the Wastewater System** – HOA’s who are more involved in understanding their wastewater system tend to be more protective of their system. This is important because some on-site systems are more sensitive than others. High water use, garbage disposal use, discharging non-disposable materials and other items can cause damage to the wastewater system. The “flush and forget” mentality can be damaging to the treatment or disposal system and may actually cause premature failure or replacement of parts. Implementing practices that result in the HOA’s understanding their wastewater system, helps prevent costly maintenance and emergency repairs.



3. **Develop a Contingency Plan** – When problems occur, it is important to know what you need to do in the event of an emergency – and emergencies will happen. HOA’s should develop contingency plans identifying who to contact to respond to an emergency in a timely manner. Develop a list of contacts for emergency services personnel, regulatory contacts, and develop a telephone calling tree to notify users to minimize water use in the event an emergency occurs. A well developed contingency plan will initiate efficient response times for service personnel, protect the HOA from enforcement action and reduce the potential for property damage, especially if a back-up occurs.

4. **Hire a Competent Service Provider** – This is one area HOA’s struggle with time after time. Many people outside of the service provider industry believe that most operators are alike. They provide similar services –so they shop for prices to get the lowest price. As service providers know, doing maintenance is one thing, but monitoring, operating and maintaining the system is something totally different. HOA’s should ask prospective service providers or the engineer what scope of work is necessary for operating the system. The HOA should use this information to develop a well-defined scope of work and send out a request for proposals. That way everyone bids on the same tasks and the HOA can then make an informed decision based on cost. HOA’s should ask for references and find out if they have relevant operation experience in the technology the HOA has.



5. **Provide Open Communication** – Typically Board members of the HOA are the ones that have direct contact with the service provider. Communication must also occur to the residents. HOA's should invite their service provider to their annual meeting to discuss the system and what can and cannot be discharged to the system. Newsletters distributed to the homeowners will also enhance communication. HOA's personnel turn over regularly, in order to maintain checks and balances. It is the responsibility of each new Board member to understand the actions of the previous Board.

Homeowners Associations that take an active involvement in their wastewater system not only provide a valuable service to their current homeowners, but also provide a sound, long-term plan that will benefit future homeowners.

Ryan Brandt is Vice President for EcoCheck, Inc. EcoCheck is a water/wastewater operations and management company in White Bear Lake, MN. EcoCheck operates over 70 decentralized wastewater systems which utilize a variety of treatment and disposal technologies. EcoCheck works with all types of responsible management entities.

EcoCheck, Inc.
4444 Centerville Road, Suite 140
White Bear Lake, MN 55127
651-255-5049