The Way We Do Business

24/7

Protecting our Financial Investment

The people who lead, manage and run King County's Wastewater Treatment Division are accountable to the people who pay monthly rates for treating wastewater from homes, businesses and other agencies. In carrying out its mission to protect public health and the environment, WTD must also protect the financial investment of ratepayers.

In June 2001, the King County Council approved an increase in the wholesale sewer rate that King County charges its component agency customers, from $19.75 a month to $23.40, effective January 2002. The rate increase was necessitated by rising energy costs, particularly electricity, and the need to stabilize the program's debt-service ratio and bond rating. The council indicated another rate increase is unlikely until 2005.

The council also approved a 60 percent increase in the 15-year surcharge that owners of new homes and businesses must pay to hook up to the regional sewer system. In October 2001, the council approved a method for calculating this "capacity charge" that raises the fee to $17.60 in 2003 and establishes other provisions to ensure that "growth pays for growth." These funds will pay for capital projects that increase system capacity.

Implementing a Productivity Initiative

Division employess in 2001 saved more than $2.8 million in an innovative productivity program modeled on the business practices of private industry. The goal of the program: to make the division the most efficient publicly operated treatment system in the nation by 2005 and to be competitive with the industry's best private operations by 2010.

Employee actions in the pilot program, called the Productivity Initiative, achieved savings in salaries and benefits totaling more than $1.1 million, and reductions in operating and maintenance costs totaling about $1.7 million.

The County Executive and Council agreed to allow the division certain freedoms and flexibility to run its business in exchange for meeting specific productivity goals and business targets. Any savings achieved as a direct result of employee actions are split equally between ratepayers (as lower fees) and division employees (as incentive pay).

Responding to Unanticipated Events and Emergencies

Reducing Energy Use

The County Executive and WTD management declared a state of emergency in December 2000 in response to the energy crisis hitting the West Coast. The crisis called for conservation measures to stave off potential brownouts, and it reduced energy use in a time of unprecedented high energy rates.

At the South Treatment Plant in Renton, for example, employees developed conservation plans with Puget Sound Energy that saved about 5 million kilowatt-hours.

The West Point Treatment Plant survived the recent energy crisis by cogenerating heat and electricity fueled by methane gas from the plant's wastewater solids digesters. And plans are to double power production.

Meeting Safety, Security Challenges

Regional and national events in 2001, most notably the Nisqually Earthquake and the terrorist attack on the East Coast, presented the division with unique safety challenges that forever changed the way it conducts business.

The division was reminded that protecting the safety of employees, public health and the public's investment in its infrastructure is without question WTD's highest priority.

In 2001, division employees showed their commitment to safety by responding to these and other safety-related incidents while also reducing the number of lost-time accidents from the previous year; enhancing their active participation in improving safety standards, plans and procedures; and designing and building safer facilities.

Moving Toward Sustainability

The utility is going green with a new roof on one of its wastewater flow regulators in Seattle. The new "green roof" on the Dexter Regulator Station is covered with soil and plants.

The green roof helps with stormwater retention. Soil and plants slow the speed of runoff. Water is stored in soil and then taken up by plants and returned to the atmosphere.

In addition, the green roof absorbs pollutants from rainwater, reduces heating and cooling costs, increases fire protection, increases sound insulation and improves aesthetics of the facility in a densely developed area.

What's Ahead

Converting Fuel to Electricity

The concept is electrifying! The reality will be electricity. And it will come from a new power plant fueled by methane gas, a byproduct of the wastewater treatment process.

At WTD's South Treatment Plant in Renton, a molten-carbonate fuel-cell power plant will generate 1 megawatt of electricity a day. That's enough electricity to support 750 households for one year.

King County will use the electricity to power the treatment plant. WTD's electricity supply contract with Puget Sound Energy calls for South plant to generate its own power by 2004.

Fuel cells offer significant potential for energy recovery. They are very efficient in converting fuel to electricity and environmentally benign, producing very low air pollution. And by using the electricity and waste heat produced in the fuel cell at South plant, the division gets a higher dollar value for use of digester gas than scrubbing and selling it to Puget Sound Energy, as now occurs.

Reaching Out

The WTD conducts various public information and outreach activities to foster an informed, well-educated public that understands the need for division programs and the public good that comes from them.

The utility conducts various public information and outreach activities including the following:

- A speakers bureau
- Community open houses
- Wastewater treatment facility tours
- "Where does it go when you flush" tours with Seattle Department of Parks and Recreation.

The division also actively involves public officials and citizens of affected jurisdictions early and actively in the planning and decision-making process for capital projects. Their efforts include the following:

- Providing information to help the public understand the need for the project, alternatives and solutions
- Coordinating public outreach with public notification requirements for environmental review and permitting
- Providing opportunities for public comment on facility siting and design elements, such as aesthetics, architecture and landscape design.

to Our Communities

Being a Good Neighbor