

Frequently Asked Questions

What's the difference between the sanitary sewer and a storm sewer?

Millcreek's sanitary sewer system receives and conveys to the City of Erie's treatment plant sewage, or wastes from sinks, basement floor drains, garage drains, toilets and the like that need treatment so that they can then be discharged without causing contamination. A storm sewer carries water that does not need treatment.

What is storm water?

By and large, it is water that does not need treatment to protect against contamination, like water running out of or off of the ground, from roof gutters, a sump pump or the like.

What difference does it make if storm water goes into the sanitary sewer system?

It makes a lot of difference in many ways:

First, no sanitary sewer system is designed or sized so as to be able to carry storm water. To do that would cost millions of dollars just to convey water for treatment that doesn't need treatment in the first place.

Second, we have an inter-municipal sanitary sewer system, with sewage flows from Millcreek and other suburbs being transported to the City of Erie for treatment at its facilities. The sanitary sewer system's users pay for the costs of transportation and treatment of those flows. Each municipality has paid for an allocated capacity in the sanitary sewer system, based on known and projected future needs. If a municipality exceeds that capacity, it is subject to very substantial surcharges.

Third, the volume of storm water flows substantially increases after storm events or when snow melts. Storm water, added to the sanitary sewerage the system is intended to convey, can exceed the system's capacity, leading to backups in people's properties. This has also led to discharges of sewage into Walnut Creek, just to protect properties, and these discharges violate state and federal laws.

Did Millcreek ever allow people to discharge stormwater into the sanitary sewer?

No.

How much storm water is going into the sanitary sewer system today?

It is estimated that, on an average day, about 25% of the flows in the sanitary sewer system come from storm water. During and after a storm event, the storm water can exceed sanitary sewer flows by as much as 15 times.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

How much is the storm water in the sewer system costing us?

If every day were average, with 25% of sanitary sewer flows transported to the City for treatment being storm water, Millcreek's sanitary sewer system each year pays about \$750,000 for transportation and treatment of storm water that doesn't need transportation or treatment. It is next to impossible to calculate flows relating to storm events, but these are substantial and simply increase that cost.

On top of that, Millcreek's system is exposed to hundreds of thousands of dollars in surcharges if its sewage flows exceed its capacity in the inter-municipal system, and when the system's capacity is exceeded, properties suffer damages from backups.

If Millcreek never allowed storm water to go into the sanitary sewer, how did it happen?

Despite these connections never being allowed and laws requiring that connections to the sanitary sewer system be inspected, they happen in a number of ways. A builder or a plumber may have decided to make the connection when the inspector wasn't at the property. A sump pump or downspout may have been connected without the Township ever being contacted.

Is Millcreek identifying and eliminating storm water connections to the sanitary sewer just because of its Consent Order and Agreement with the Department of Environmental Protection?

No, but that Consent Order and Agreement is one reason for the policy. Until recently, it was very difficult if not impossible to identify precisely how and where storm water was entering the sanitary sewer system. Today, technology enables us to do this. By the time PaDEP contacted Millcreek on issues leading to the COA, the Township and the Sewer Authority had recognized the substantial annual costs of the unlawful connections and the threat they posed to the Township's future growth, not to mention its efforts to end discharges into Walnut Creek.

What is Millcreek going to do to reduce storm water flows in the sanitary sewer system?

On March 30, 2004, Millcreek's Board of Supervisors adopted a detailed policy with procedures to identify and terminate unlawful connections of storm water into the sanitary sewer system. As a general rule, the Township will identify areas of the Township to investigate. Notices will be sent to property owners in advance, asking that they call to schedule a time that is convenient for them. If the owner does not respond, a second notice will be sent. Township employees will visit properties, to identify connections to the sewer system and determine if any downspout, sump or other storm water connections have been made to the sanitary sewer. If an unlawful connection is found, it will be the owner's responsibility to terminate it and re-route the storm water in some other way that complies with regulations.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What if an owner doesn't respond so that an inspection can be done?

The Township can either cite the owner for violation, schedule a camera inspection and charge the owner for the additional costs or do both.

If an inspection shows that there is no unlawful connection, what happens then?

The Township will give the owner a letter confirming that the property was inspected and that no unlawful connection was found. This will give the owner something that will help if a buyer or someone else asks later on.

If an inspection discloses an unlawful connection but the owner doesn't terminate it, what will happen?

If an inspection indicates that there is one or more unlawful connection, the Township will give the owner notice that identifies what the unlawful connection is and provide detail as to what the owner must do. A reasonable time will be allowed for this work to be done, and weather conditions will affect this. If the owner does arrange to have the connection terminated and the storm water re-routed with the work being inspected, the Township can cite the owner for violation (which exposes the owner to fines), do the work itself and bill the owner, or both.

If the Township is inspecting in an area, can owners of 2 or more properties who have to get work done hire the same contractor?

The Township does not want to tell owners who to call or how to do things. It is likely, though, that owners could save money if they work together and retain the same contractor, as that contractor would already be in the area and would not have to mobilize separately.

Will the Township be hiring more people to do its inspections?

The Supervisors hope that it will not be necessary to hire more people. Sewer Department personnel who, in the past, made service calls to benefit private properties, are being reassigned to work relating to inspections and termination of unlawful connections, as well as additional maintenance for the sanitary sewer system. The Sewer Authority has retained a firm to do camera work to identify unlawful connections more quickly. This increases the number of properties that can be inspected.

Will terminating unlawful connections reduce sewer rates over the long term?

The costs of every sewer system are increasing each year. Terminating unlawful connections can save a lot of money, which at least will slow the rate of increasing system costs.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Why has the Township's Sewer Use Ordinance been amended?

The Sewer Use Ordinance was amended on March 30, 2004 as Ordinance No. 2004-4 to better define regulations dealing with responsibilities for different parts of the system, permits and inspections and proper use of the system.

Who is responsible for what maintaining what parts of the sanitary sewer system?

Millcreek Township is responsible for the sewer mains, which usually are located within a street's right of way. The owner of the property served by the system is generally responsible for all parts of the sewer system from that private property to the public mains.

Is it unusual for property owners to have to maintain the sewer on their property?

No. The City of Erie and most area systems require owners to do this.

If my sewer backs up or doesn't work right, what should I do?

You should contact a plumbing or other contractor who has experience working on sewers. Millcreek is now requiring that contractors doing work on the sewer system hold a license issued by the Township. Most problems in the sewer system are found on private properties, and can be caused by tree roots, broken piping and other conditions.

If I call the plumber and he or she finds that there is a problem in the main, what should the plumber or I do then?

If it is truly believed that there is an obstruction or other problem in the main, the Township's Sewer Department should be contacted immediately. The Sewer Department should not be contacted unless there really is good reason to believe there is a problem with the main.

The Supervisors also adopted Rules and Regulations - why did they do that?

The Sewer Use Ordinance says that details on many issues are to be provided in Rules and Regulations for the sanitary sewer system. The Rules and Regulations adopted on March 30, 2004 are the first detailed regulations for the system.

Does the Township have a say as to whether I can have an on-lot sewage system?

Yes. While the Department of Environmental Resources, through Erie County's Health Department, has established standards for how an on-lot system has to be designed, the municipality has authority to decide whether an on-lot system is allowed in the first place.