

Conducting Income Surveys by Barney Whatley Capacity Development Specialist

Financing water system improvement projects in the State of Nebraska is a relatively simple process compared to some other states. The State of Nebraska utilizes a single loan and grant application that is reviewed by the Water and Wastewater Advisory Committee (WWAC). The application is reviewed by all of the funding agencies, and the committee advises on the best use of available dollars for funding as many projects as possible. The funding agencies represented at these meetings are USDA Rural Development, The Drinking Water State Revolving Loan Fund, the Clean Water State Revolving Loan Fund and the Department of Economic Development, which administers Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) Funds. Each of these funding agencies has their own rules regarding eligibility for funding. The eligibility requirements are related to project contents, total project costs and system finances.

Financial eligibility requirements are an issue for systems wishing to receive funding from either USDA or the CDBG program. Each of these funding agencies has different requirements for funding, but in both cases the systems need to show a financial need. The most recent census data is generally used to determine eligibility for these funds, but in some cases changes in the population or economy of the system may make this data outdated. There is also the possibility that the project being considered benefits one section of the system more than others, and that the residents who are benefiting from the project may meet the income eligibility requirements. One way to determine this is to conduct an income survey of the system or portion of the system to be benefited to determine eligibility.

The first thing that must be accomplished prior to conducting an income survey is to inform the public of the need for the survey. A public information program should be conducted using the local media, posters, public meetings or any other method available to inform the public of the water system deficiencies and the need for funding to correct them. Since a large percentage of the survey forms must be returned for the survey to be considered adequate, it is important that the need for all surveys to be returned be stressed. While it is important that people understand the basics of the funding process, it is important the information be presented in a neutral manner. Any suggestion that the system is looking for incomes below a certain level or that "high income" residents should not complete the survey could cause the survey results to be declared inaccurate and funding to be refused. All residents of the target area should be encouraged to fill out the survey form as accurately as possible.

The second object to be overcome in an income survey is the reluctance of people to divulge their financial information. Most people feel that this is very personal information that they do not wish to share with their neighbors. One way of overcoming this reluctance is to insure the confidentiality of the survey results. There are many different organizations, including NeRWA, that are willing to tabulate the survey data and insure the privacy of the information they receive. By having the survey forms

accompanied by an envelope pre-addressed to the assisting organization, it assures the citizens of the community that the information they divulge will not be seen by system personnel. The tabulated results that are reported to the water system consist of summary data only, stating the number and percentage of households or persons who meet the eligibility requirements for the funding.

It is also important that the survey forms be delivered to the residents in the least threatening manner. A civic organization such as a chamber of commerce or local betterment group could be utilized to distribute the survey forms to all residents. By hand delivering the survey forms, it presents an opportunity to explain the purpose of the survey and the importance of having all surveys returned. The canvassing group should be trained to answer all questions carefully and neutrally, not giving any indication that certain incomes would be preferable to others. Just explaining that the income survey is a requirement of the funding agency should be adequate.

By notifying the public of the necessity of conducting an income survey, keeping the citizen's financial information confidential and showing the importance of each survey by hand delivering them to the residents, the system should be able to complete a successful income survey. Even if the survey does not accomplish the desired results, it can be an opportunity to inform the community of the deficiencies in the system, prepare them for possible rate increases to correct the problem and show them that the governing body is doing all it can to lessen the financial impact of the project on its customers.