

An Article about Water and Sewer Rate Increases

Shared by Randy Hellbusch, Circuit Rider

I was planning on writing an article about how much water & sewer rates are increasing in small systems throughout Nebraska due to aging infrastructure and regulations. This article I discovered from “The Kansas City Star” sums it up fairly well and made me realize that this isn’t just a local issue.

BY STEVE EVERLY

THE KANSAS CITY STAR

Think again if you believe running a water or wastewater utility is an uneventful way to make a living.

Everything was once fairly staid, with plenty of cheap water available, and one way or another the waste from toilets and such was quickly — and cheaply — disposed of.

It’s not so simple anymore.

The need to replace water pipes and repair aging water distribution systems is raising costs and rates. Dumping raw sewage into rivers is frowned on and, as Kansas City and other jurisdictions discovered, the fix is expensive.

Toss in water conservation, which is causing revenues to decline for many utilities, and you have a cesspool of financial worries, according to a report released Monday by Black & Veatch, an engineering firm based in Overland Park.

“It’s all about cost pressures,” said Mike Orth, a senior vice president of the company’s water business, which helps utilities deal with the issues.

This is Black & Veatch’s third annual report on the water business, based on a national survey of industry professionals. Previous reports have also shown concerns, although their magnitude grows and new ones crop up.

Another concern is that water and wastewater utilities have an aging workforce, so finding replacement employees with the necessary training is another challenge.

And the drought in large swaths of the country is increasingly affecting water supplies. The Midwest is still better off than most parts of the country, but the drought is showing up in some parts of the region.

Wichita is facing a water shortage because of the drought across much of western Kansas. The city has even mulled someday building a plant that would allow sewer water to be reused for drinking or other uses.

The Kansas City area, which taps the Missouri and Kansas rivers for water, is so far largely unscathed, but an extended drought and lower river levels could eventually have an impact. Repercussions from the drought could grow and be reflected in next year's report.

Water conservation has not gotten much attention in the Midwest, although low-flow toilets and other measures have still done enough to reduce revenues at 40 percent of the region's water utilities.

One dubious area the Midwest does lead in is having combination sewage and stormwater pipe. In a heavy rain, the water in the combination pipes along with sewage is dumped without being treated. Such systems were also built in some other regions of the country but were especially popular in the Midwest.

As a result, Kansas City has had water pollution troubles, but the city has started replacing pipes with separate systems that will end up costing billions of dollars.

Orth said a big challenge that will continue to face the industry is planning and paying for the infrastructure replacements and meeting environmental regulations.

As a result, consumers are likely to see higher water and sewer bills for many years. In the survey, 23.4 percent of those who responded said they expected double-digit annual increases over the next decade. Forty percent predicted 5 to 10 percent annual increases.

Read more here: <http://www.kansascity.com/news/business/article511666/Sewer-and-water-rates-will-continue-to-climb-in-Midwest-and-U.S..html#storylink=cpy>