Educating and engaging the public is perhaps one of the most important, yet least incorporated aspects of any municipal service. An informed public, and an informed Board, can be your best assets. There are several simple ways described in this chapter to let people know what you do.
**Chapter 5: Educating and Engaging the Public on Wastewater Treatment: Tools & Tips**

Developing and maintaining a positive relationship with the public being served is vital. However, the intricacies of wastewater systems operations and maintenance along with financing and rate structures are foreign to the vast majority of the public. Most people may never think about wastewater, where it goes or the complexities involved in providing this service. Despite this, citizens often want to provide input to local government on the impact and cost of these facilities and services. For this public input to be useful there should be both public education and an established, easy and efficient process by which the public may participate in deliberative discussions regarding their wastewater utility. There are many organizations and resources available to assist communities with education and public participation programs. The following includes tips and ideas on how to better educate the public your utility serves: what information to share, and how to educate and better engage the public in the decision making process regarding one of the community’s most valuable assets—the wastewater treatment plant.

**How to Reach Consumers**

Because local government generally acts as the primary provider of wastewater treatment for its citizens, government also becomes their link to understanding the operations, maintenance, cost and proper use of those services. Utilities have the opportunity (and the duty) to educate their customers regarding the services, user responsibilities, and the water quality goals that those utilities support. Here are some key elements for reaching out to, and educating the community:

- Mission Statement
- Community Surveys
- Presentations at schools, civic groups, etc.
- Bill stuffers
- Newsletters
- Open House events
- Public Service Announcements

**Mission Statement**

A treatment plant has a clear and distinct mission, but is there a mission statement describing it to the community? Mission statements are generally only two to three sentences and can be created easily, but should be well thought out as they are the single most important tool in helping the public understand what a treatment plant does. Many communities already have a mission statement for their wastewater treatment plant.

**Customer Surveys**

A utility can often lose contact with its users. This may be the result of not actively engaging the community, or listening to only a select and vocal few. To obtain a representative set of consumer opinions, it helps to conduct a customer survey. The survey may

*Mission: cleaner water for future generations*
Educating and Engaging the Public on Wastewater Treatment: Tools & Tips

Survey development, marketing or public relations professionals are generally quite helpful in conducting a customer survey. These professionals are familiar with the procedures for proper survey preparation, distribution, validation and interpretation. However, if the cost to hire a professional is a challenge, consider contacting a local college or university—generally there are faculty, staff and/or students who are well trained in survey development and can help for free or for a more affordable rate.

Public Meetings and Presentations

As a public body, a community’s utility commission will have regular public meetings. These meetings must be orderly, well managed and productive. Technical presentations at these meetings should be well prepared and should be both technically complete and, especially if requiring budgetary appropriations, easily understood by the public. Business at public meetings should be completed in a professional manner, and unnecessary or repetitive discussion should be minimized.

While public participation should be encouraged, these open meetings should be conducted and managed in a professional manner. Members of the public should be required to keep their remarks brief and to the point. At times, it may be necessary to place a time limit on public comments to allow sufficient time for all public input. It is important to manage the presentation so that public comments are relevant to the discussion and not repetitive. Leaders should be ready to refocus the discussion if individuals provide irrelevant testimony or repeat comments.

Don’t be reluctant to go out and talk about what you do and the services provided to consumers in the community. Accept invitations to speak at community and civic meetings, and look for opportunities to be invited to present and discuss what you do. Prepare a PowerPoint presentation and/or handouts as aids in your appearance. Make it fun and interesting—it is your job and your plant and no one knows it better than you.

Bill Stuffer Announcements

The bill stuffer has long been a favorite tool of many water and wastewater utility managers. Bill stuffer informational packets are available from a number of commercial suppliers and trade organizations. These are professionally prepared documents that cover a wide range of public education topics of interest to water and wastewater customers.

Some bill stuffers are specific to topics that may be of growing importance to the community, such as source water protection, biosolids (sludge) management or wastewater recycling. Bill stuffers provide an

Here is just one example from the Onondaga County Department of Water Environment Protection, stipulating its Mission, as well as its Vision and Core Values:

**VISION:** To be a respected leader in wastewater treatment, stormwater management, and the protection of our environment using state-of-the-art innovative technologies and sound scientific principles as our guide.

**MISSION:** To protect and improve the water environment of Onondaga County in a cost-effective manner ensuring the health and sustainability of our community and economy.

**CORE VALUES:**
- Excellence
- Teamwork
- Honesty
- Innovation
- Cost-Effectiveness
- Safety

As stamped on the manhole cover above, communication is at the heart of good management.
opportunity to begin the educational process for the consumer and community. Most bill stuffers can be customized to include specific information about the utility. The Water Environment Federation (www.wef.org) has many of these pieces of literature available and are designed to be customizable. They are generally inexpensive and cover a wide variety of topics.

**Newsletters**

An annual, biannual or quarterly newsletter is an excellent way to communicate to customers the plans and accomplishments of a water or wastewater utility. Newsletters should be brief and to the point. They should include, whenever appropriate or possible, pictures, graphs, figures, tables and charts. Overly lengthy articles or pages full of text generally do not attract the attention of your customers. Also, as more people are moving into the digital age, you can create and send email newsletters using free web-based programs that are easy to use.

However, an important consideration in deciding to publish a newsletter is consistency. Once a utility decides it is going to publish a newsletter, it must maintain that commitment. Consistency in length, font type and size, time of year sent, consistency in layout and design, and in voice, are all things to consider. Failure to follow through will reflect poorly on the professionalism of the operation.

**Open Houses**

An open house, tour or other special event can be an excellent way to get the public and perhaps the media to see what goes on in water or wastewater systems. It can also be an event in which employees and public officials may involve their families in their work.

The event should be well organized, with a specific schedule of events. Tours should be in small groups along a safe (and, if possible, odor-free) route. If necessary, safety equipment such as hard hats and hearing protection should be provided. Wearing appropriate shoes should be communicated in advance with no flip-flops or open toe shoes allowed. Speakers should be well prepared and ready to answer questions from their audience. Some communities will invite other organizations, consulting firms, educational institutions and the like, to set-up informational tables at the event so attendees can learn more about water treatment and its importance to the environment and public health. Consider a barbecue, coffee and doughnuts, or other refreshments that could be provided for free, or provided by a local civic group for purchase to support its organization. Make it truly a community event. It is incredibly important to publicize the event to make sure it is successful and worth the time invested. Think about developing a publicity plan that includes ads in the local newspaper, community, church and civic newsletters, fliers, mailings and other efforts that may help spread the word to as many people as possible for as inexpensively as possible. Again, some private consulting firms can help with this, though a few ambitious and savvy community members can be equally as valuable.

**Public Service Announcements**

Public service announcements are a good way to promote environmental and safety messages to the public.
public on behalf of utility operations. Local media outlets can provide more information on the specific requirements for placing a public service announcement. However, public service announcements are being harder to place due to budgetary constraints often found in local broadcast media. Sometimes the local media outlets will help produce the commercial; if not, it can become an additional cost. Consider partnering with other operators in the area to create a public service announcement that will be broadcast to all of those communities—this will make more practical sense both to the media outlet (which often covers several counties) and to all the utilities/communities involved in the message.

**What to Talk About**

Now that you have the tools to reach out and educate your community, what should you inform them? Obviously, you will want to frame the message in terms of local issues, current events and the needs of the treatment plant and its community. In other words, keep it real!

**Promoting Best Practices/Consumer Responsibility**

As important as it is to educate your community on the operations, maintenance and finances of its treatment plant, it is equally important to let the consumers know how they can help, why their behaviors and contributions make plant operators’ jobs easier, and why it is important to do—or not do—some rather simple things to support water quality efforts. Keep in mind that the actions or inactions of the community in regards to water quality issues can have deleterious effects on other things the community might value. In promoting consumer responsibility, answer these questions: What is your receiving water body? Could it be negatively affected, or improved by the actions of the surrounding community? Does your community value local water bodies for hunting, fishing, boating, swimming and other recreation? How can community actions help the plant and others in efforts to advance community values?

**Human Health and Safety**

It is often helpful to educate consumers about how their actions can protect the environment, their own health and safety and that of the community. More importantly, let them know that the wastewater treatment plant through its efficient operation protects public health and the environment, as is mandated by the Clean Water Act. The cost of inaction or short-term cost-cutting is much more expensive for the community in the long term, and can cause immediate, long term and potentially dangerous situations both for the local community and those downstream.

You may also want to discuss, particularly if hosting a public event at the plant, all of the requirements and procedures necessary to ensure human health and safety at the plant.

**Water and Energy Conservation**

Water conservation is an important issue on two levels. First, as consumers conserve water, they conserve the capacity of the facilities that perform treatment. Excessive water use wastes the capacity of the systems producing the water and treating the resulting wastewater. Second, with increasing regularity, public demand for water exceeds locally available supplies, which can increase supply costs in the short and long-term. Water conservation efforts are the best tool for stretching those supplies as far as possible to serve the present and future needs of communities.

Experience and public opinion surveys indicate that most customers are interested in conserving water and appreciate the cost savings from reduced usage. However, they may not know how to conserve, despite the fact that water conservation techniques are convenient and easy to implement. Effective public education campaigns can substantially improve water conservation, contribute to system capacity and build appreciation for the important work of treatment plant staff and local officials.

Topics related to water conservation:

- **Leak Protection**: know if you have one and how much water a leak can waste.
- **Lawn and Garden**: how much water generally is used for landscaping; the type of landscaping that uses less water; and more efficient ways to water.
- **Car Washing**: how to reduce water use with driveway car washing; how water can be saved in commercial car washing.
- **Household Use**: changes in household water use habits that save on water usage.
- **Industrial and Commercial**: pollution prevention to reduce water usage and in wastewater generation.
- **Water Metering**: how water usage is affected
by billing based on usage vs. flat rates with no restrictions on usage.

Source Water Protection

The actions of irresponsible individual consumers can have disastrous effects on groundwater and surface water supplies. These impacts on water supplies can also prevent recreational usage and natural habitats. Customers must be informed about how their actions, such as the use and disposal of chemicals, fertilizers, pharmaceuticals and household cleaning products, can affect water supplies. Educate the community on what happens when individuals flush these items down the drain. To protect water supplies from contamination, communities need watershed management plans (surface water supplies) and wellhead protection programs (groundwater supplies).

Storm Sewers

While the operation of storm sewers may not be governed by the sewer authority, storm sewers are an important and often misunderstood part of a community’s infrastructure. Misuse of storm sewers can lead to significant water pollution.

Many people do not know that sanitary sewers flow to treatment plants that provide significant treatment to remove pollutants before discharge. Most storm sewers flow directly to natural waters, with little or no treatment. Often these natural waters are drinking water supplies.

Chemicals, trash, leaves and other debris discharged into storm sewers, or that run off into storm sewers from lawns or driveways, are not removed before they reach those natural waters. Many communities have started educational programs to help the public understand the importance of limiting polluting discharges into storm sewers. These programs have often included painted messages next to street drains to indicate that only rainwater should go down the drain. (More information on stormwater management can be found in Chapter 6.)

Proper Disposal of Hazardous Waste

Improper disposal of hazardous waste can cause contamination of surface water supplies, groundwater and soil. Hazardous waste can also adversely affect the biological treatment processes at wastewater plants and can contaminate landfills that were not designed to receive these materials. Many communities have started household hazardous waste programs to inform the public of the proper disposal procedures for various waste products.

Often the first step in a household hazardous waste program is to educate the public about the types of common materials that are hazardous. Many products used daily are considered hazardous when they become waste. For example, the used or leftover contents of household products, such as paints, cleaners, stains and varnishes, car batteries, motor oil and pesticides, are all household hazardous wastes.

Brochures and bill stuffers can be used to address the issues relating to proper hazardous waste disposal. In addition, most state environmental protection agencies offer hazardous waste disposal programs that can help communities address this matter.

Communicating and Managing Facility’s Public Image

Many people say perception is reality. What is the perception of your treatment plant to your users—is it clean, well-kept, with nice curb appeal? If not, the perception may soon become a reality as you struggle to build and maintain community confidence in the level of service the plant delivers. It is essential for the public to know that the community’s facilities are well managed. Because the public is quick to realize when there are problems with local facilities, assumptions can be associated with poor management. Consequently, it is important that all aspects of wastewater service, including management, provide the highest quality service and render a professional impression that begins with reliable service.

Learn more about the “Ten Steps” at the next Panel on Wastewater for Local Representatives.
Contact NYWEA at (315) 422-7811.
Managing the Media

Absent an effort to bring the good work of community utility systems to the media's attention, the media will probably not call until there is a problem. Positive events like Household Hazardous Waste Take Backs, Open Houses and other programs will garner positive media; but even if the utility receives media coverage for the positive aspects of its operations, the potential for negative media attention always exists. To make a good impression, leaders should be as open and honest as possible, being ready with and certain of the facts, and offering fact sheets or summaries to avoid any misstatements about events or accidents.

Many publications and training courses are available to help staff deal with the media. It may be best to delegate responsibility for media contact to a single individual with good communication skills and to assure that they are trained in the specifics of media interaction. This individual can then coordinate media contacts with technical staff relating to specific issues.

Responding to Correspondence

It is important that the utility respond promptly to all correspondence from its customers. If an issue is likely to take some time to address, a reply should nevertheless be sent immediately, indicating when the customer may expect a specific response. The response should be thorough and attempt to fully address the issues raised in the original correspondence. Replies to correspondence may require a meeting to discuss more difficult issues, and a summary of the results of that subsequent meeting should be sent to the correspondent.

All correspondence should be professionally prepared and signed by an authority representing the organization. A file of all incoming correspondence and replies should be maintained for future reference.

Water Environment Federation Public Education Program

As a leading source of water quality information, the Water Environment Federation (WEF) develops programs and materials to help its members communicate with their target audiences about key water quality issues. As a not-for-profit technical and education organization for water quality professionals, its goal is to increase an understanding of the direct role water and wastewater services have in the protection of public health, the economy and the environment.

Since 1928, WEF has worked to provide its members, public officials and the general public with the necessary tools to engage in or learn ways to improve quality of life through water resources management, water protection, and water and wastewater treatment.

For the general public, WEF offers a full brochure series, videos, posters and CD-ROMs on a wide range of water quality topics including wastewater treatment processes, careers, point and non-point source pollution, watershed management, water and wastewater infrastructure, fats, oils and greases, and water and biosolids recycling. Developed by water quality professionals, the materials can be used as informational mailers, bill inserts, and handouts for community meetings, exhibits, plant tours and school programs.

For educators, WEF offers, “The Water Sourcebook,” a supplemental K-12 school curriculum on water quality. The popular hands-on series is designed to be an easy way for teachers, non-formal educators and water quality professionals to teach elementary and secondary grades about today's most important water quality issues which include wastewater and drinking water treatment, ground and surface water and wetlands.

To supplement this effort, WEF also offers a full-day, hands-on training workshop for high school science teachers at WEFTEC®, the Federation's annual technical exhibition and conference. Featuring Sewer Science, a mobile wastewater treatment plant equipped with specially designed tanks, real-life laboratory analytical equipment and workbook, the award-winning simulation guides teachers through the wastewater treatment process. The miniature laboratory and supplemental materials, through a unique partnership of corporations, municipalities, consultants, community organizations and area high schools, are then provided
exclusively to high schools in the conference host city for a full academic year.

For students, WEF organizes the Stockholm Junior Water Prize (SJWP), the most prestigious international youth award for a high school water science research project. Organized in the United States by WEF and its member associations, its purpose is to increase students’ interest in water-related issues and research, and to sensitize them as future leaders to global water challenges.

Understanding the influential role of the general public, public officials and the media in the formation of public opinion and policy, WEF also works to inform those audiences about water quality through educational tours, congressional testimony, newsletters, news releases, press events, formal comments on regulatory and legislative matters, and grassroots public education programs.

The Water Environment Federation has also developed a new campaign titled WATER’S WORTH IT, that aims to raise awareness about the value and importance of water, water-related issues, and the water profession. The campaign helps to answer the question about how our actions, attitudes, and the things we most value are so closely connected with water. The program is designed to inform a range of audiences, including the general public, media, opinion leaders, decision-makers, and elected officials.

The goals of the campaign are to:

- Demystify water and wastewater treatment by showing the direct connections between what water sector professionals do and what the public values — create jobs, protect health, protect the environment, and provide clean water.
- Expand and deepen the awareness of the value of water.
- Explain that water is a precious and limited resource that needs to be recycled and reused.
- Elevate the profile of water sector professionals by building respect and appreciation for the services they provide.
- Create a foundation of public awareness to support needed infrastructure investments.
- Support cutting-edge practices to deliver, recover, and reuse water resources.

How Does It Work?

Everyone who uses water is encouraged to join this coordinated effort to raise awareness about the value and importance of water. By joining our voices behind this campaign, each of us can contribute to a positive change.

For members of the water sector, the campaign will:

- Provide you with communication tools you will need to succeed,
- Help you to build alliances at the state, regional, and community level, and
- Help you coordinate a flexible outreach and education effort that is easily tailored to what's happening in your state, region, community or agency.

For the general public, the campaign will:

- Provide you with the information you need to be an educated and responsible consumer,
- Help you to create a personal connection with water
- Show you how your life is inextricably linked to this vital resource, and
- Help you to understand how important the water profession is and the essential services that it provides to your quality of life.

We encourage you to learn more about this program and how you can help be a voice for water.

This chapter prepared by Khris Dodson, Communications and Program Manager at the Environmental Finance Center at Syracuse University.