

Our City

“It” is supposed to run downhill. However, when “it” doesn’t, it finds its way into the lower recesses of homes and on my desk. On May 21 the City experienced another rain event. According to inflows at the Waste Water Treatment Plant it was about 30% less than the one we had two years ago August. It caused high water in the usual places, primarily at the corner of Van Buren and Fort Hall. Based on the history of other rain events over the past few years the City’s systems handled it; except for an area of town that up until May 21 had never had a problem. Homes on the west side of Hutchison and the 200 block of Taylor had “muddy water” back up into their basements from the sewer line. The homeowners who suffered the damage are understandably upset.

I cannot fault their sentiment. Prior to being elected to the City Council nearly ten years ago, I had a similar situation with a broken waterline and I was stuck with the cost of repairing the damage. As the waterline connection failed on my side of the fitting, the City was not liable for the damage caused, so I paid to replace sidewalk, grass and landscaping. At the time I too was upset, and to be truthful I ain’t over it yet! But, I understand the why of it.

The sewer line that services Hutchison is rather unique in American Falls. It forms a dead end T in the alley between Hutchison and Tyhee, with the base of the T terminating behind Hank Boomer’s old house at Hutchison and Polk. The top of the T transects the blocks east and west of Hutchison about three-quarters of the way south, not going all the way to Taylor. It then connects into the main sewer line on Fort Hall.

So it begs the question, what the hell happened? There is no question about the sewer somehow being affected by the rain event. When the sewer manholes in the alley between Hutchison and Tyhee were inspected after the storm, it was evident that the water in the system had risen four to five feet, but lowered to base flows after. Why were the properties on the west side of the Hutchison alley and only one on the 100 and 200 blocks of Taylor affected? I don’t know and neither does Waste Water Superintendent Pete Cortez. What we do know is that neither the homeowners’ insurance nor the City’s insurance are willing to pay for the damage to the properties affected. The City’s insurance company, Idaho Counties Risk Management Program (ICRMP), is telling us that the rain event was an unavoidable act of nature and the City is not liable for any damage caused. The property owners are hearing the same thing from their insurance companies who are refusing to pay for the damages. Which leaves me, the City Council and the property owners in a pretty tough place.

Superintendent Cortez is doing all he can to determine what caused the problem. As our new camera van that will be used to diagnose all our sewer lines will not be here until the end of this month or the first of next, he has contacted the waste water department for the City of Pocatello to see if an agreement might be reached to use theirs, but that request has become a bit of a sticky wicket too. The one thing that Pete has pointed out to me that makes sense but doesn’t explain what happened is something that most of us have experienced: that is some type of a plugged drain that causes water somewhere not to flow correctly. Well, the plug doesn’t eventually just go away, usually it gets worse; it must somehow be removed with “Drano,” a plunger or “RotoRooter.” The water levels in the Hutchison sewer line have returned to their base flows. Again, I don’t know why.

In my absence at the last City Council meeting, Council President Dan Hammond told the effected home owners that we would investigate the situation and do our best to determine what happened. Pete and his crew are doing that, but short of a camera system that will actually let them see inside the sewer lines any ideas we come up with are just based on supposition. I hope we have some answers by the time this is printed and the next City Council meeting. On a darker note still in our conversation with ICRMP we were told that three similar events happened in Twin Falls, Blackfoot and Rexburg last fall; all the claims were denied.

I have taken a lot of space here to tell you I don't know a damn thing. But, one of the comments I get from folks who read this column is that they appreciate being informed of what is going on and the transparency we as a City try to provide. I see that as part of my job as Mayor. As taxpayers and citizens you deserve to know what your investment is paying for. I know to some it doesn't seem like you get much of anything and when "it" doesn't flow like it is supposed to it certainly feels like a really bad deal. I won't argue with that, and at this point there seems to be little I can do about it.

In an effort to curtail major environmental violations and property damage similar to those described above, efforts began over eight years ago to replace our waste water treatment plant and some of the waste water lift stations within the system. Those projects are essentially complete as of last Thursday when the City and our partners held a ribbon cutting and open house at the new waste water treatment plant. I would like to thank our partners in this project from Keller Associates, RSCI Construction, Star Corporation Construction, USDA Rural Development and the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality. More specifically I need to thank former Mayor Amy Manning for her considerable efforts in this project; Waste Water Committee members Ralph "Moon" Wheeler, Dempsey Elder, Ron Miller, Bruce Hauber, Larry Jones, Linda Annen, Brian Barclay and Joe Fleishman; City Council members Norman Wright, Dean Weaver, Kathy Robertson, Dan Hammond, Stuart Pankratz and Kristen Jensen; last but certainly not least City Clerk Robyn Herndon, Superintendent Pete Cortez and the rest of the Water and Waste Water crew. You each made a very difficult but necessary project possible. Thank you!

Thank you too to the City's Historical Commission who I sent out without notice to you to select the outstanding yards for flower display. The Commissions results for the three most Outstanding Yards for Flower Displays were: 905 Hillcrest; 135 Howard (travel the alley); and 114 Grant (include view from Fairway Drive). There were many other beautiful yards including the addresses below that must be recognized here: 266 Washington; 385 Jefferson; 370 Madison; 373 Van Buren; and 246/234 McKinley.

Back to a much more sobering and somber note; we escaped real tragedy two weeks ago when Larry and Fawn Wright were hit by a passing truck as they were working on their vehicle off an exit between American Falls and Pocatello. Larry, the City's master mechanic, survived with several less than critical injuries while his wife Fawn struggles to stay with us as she is being treated at the University of Utah Medical Center. Our heartfelt prayers and wishes are with Larry and Fawn at this critical time.

Until next week...