

For Information Only

Improved Sewer Service Surcharge Response

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Recommendation

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Finance Implications

There are no financial impacts identified at this time.

Background

Introduction

One of the priorities identified in the Water Wastewater Tactical Plan was to examine and prioritize business processes that required improvements. Given the sensitive nature of the sewer backup business process, it was given a top priority for improvements which are outlined in this report.

Background

According to the Ontario Municipal Benchmarking Initiative (OMBI), the City of Greater Sudbury has a higher than average sewer backup rate when compared to other OMBI municipalities. Water and Wastewater Services is focusing on initiatives to improve not only this statistic but also the customer experience in this area. One such initiative is revamping the CGS' sewer backup process in an effort to improve the overall customer experience.

Sewer backups can be caused by numerous factors, but the one thing that is consistent with any of these events is that they are a huge inconvenience and often stressful for anyone who experiences them. Most often, they are caused by aging infrastructure where pipes become cracked, allowing roots to enter, or a broken pipe piece may create an obstruction or a ridge where things cannot pass. The pipe could also settle and create a sag where the gravity flow does not move along properly anymore. There are also instances where something improper has been flushed down a drain or toilet which can obstruct the pipe such as grease that hardens and constricts the pipe or an object that plugs the pipe.. Regardless of the cause, W/WW would like to better support our customers through this process by making some improvements to our existing business process.

Signed By

Report Prepared By

Cheryl Beam
Supervisor III Distribution & Collection
Digitally Signed Jan 21, 15

Division Review

Nick Benkovich
Director of Water/Wastewater Services
Digitally Signed Jan 21, 15

Recommended by the Department

Tony Cecutti
General Manager of Infrastructure
Services
Digitally Signed Jan 28, 15

Recommended by the C.A.O.

Doug Nadorozny
Chief Administrative Officer
Digitally Signed Jan 28, 15

In developing the revised program, other Canadian municipalities were surveyed to determine what the City of Greater Sudbury could learn from other municipalities' response practices. The new sewer backup program that is being proposed in this report is very similar to many programs that have been received successfully by customers in other municipalities.

The goals of the new process include:

- increased transparency and better information sharing with customers;
- a streamlined process to minimize the number of calls a customer needs to make; and,
- better use of widely available and affordable technology to aid in more precise decision making.

The process changes are not anticipated to create any new budgetary impacts, only an improvement to the service that we offer our community, and an improvement in the consistency of the quality of the information that we use operationally to make decisions.

Current Process

The current process that a customer experiencing a sewer backup would follow is outlined below:

- 1) Customer both arranges for a sewer safety inspection with Union Gas and calls a plumber.
- 2) If the plumber suspects that the blockage is on the City side, the plumber contacts the City so that property line information can be verified while the plumber is onsite with their snake in the sanitary sewer service
- 3) If City staff determine that the blockage is on City side, then the plumber is instructed to send their invoice to the City for reimbursement (to a maximum of 2 hours)
- 4) The City will take any necessary follow-up actions to rectify any deficiencies on the City's portion of the sanitary sewer service to avoid future recurrences if the backup was a result of a problem on the City side

New Process Description

Customers will have two options (A or B) that they can follow in the future, which are outlined below:

A) Customer Chooses City service

- 1) Customer places a call to 311 to report a sewer backup. Customer will be advised to call back once they have arranged for their sewer safety inspection from Union Gas.
- 2) A contracted plumbing service is dispatched to the location of the blockage. The plumber will clear the blockage for the customer as well as perform a CCTV inspection of the sanitary sewer service.
- 3) The customer will get a copy of the CCTV inspection
- 4) The next business day the responsible supervisor will review information related to the backup to determine responsibility for the blockage (cause of blockage, property line information, etc)
- 5) If the cause of the blockage is determined to be the responsibility of the City, the City will take any necessary remedial actions to ensure that there aren't future recurrences; if the cause of the blockage is determined to be the responsibility of the customer, a flat rate fee will apply along with an explanation of the assessment of the information from the City.

B) Customer chooses to hire a plumber of their choice

- 1) Customer will need to arrange for a sewer safety inspection from Union Gas
- 2) Customer both arranges for a sewer safety inspection with Union Gas and calls a plumber
- 3) If the plumber and customer suspect that the blockage is the City's responsibility, the customer will need to submit information as part of the reimbursement process. This process will have the same enhanced requirements for information as the contracted plumber requires so that all parties are operating with the same requirements
- 4) Should the information meet the requirements of the reimbursement policy, a reimbursement to the customer in the amount defined by the policy shall be paid (consistent with rates paid to the City's contracted service)
- 5) If the cause of the blockage is determined to be the responsibility of the City, the City will take any necessary remedial actions to ensure that there aren't future recurrences

Discussion

The new process still allows the customer to choose their service provider. Should the customer choose the City to provide service, a more streamlined process with less calls is available to help them through the event they have experienced. It is anticipated that decisions will increase transparency and be easier to understand by using CCTV technology where a video of the service lateral will be obtained so that all parties can see what is going on inside the pipe. A copy of this diagnostic tool will be given to both the customer and to the City so that all parties have the same information. This is not a requirement in the current process and has been added to improve the transparency in decision making.

Costing will be controlled by changing the policy from a payment of two hours to paying either the contractor or the plumber through the reimbursement policy under the same rules. If the customer chooses to use the City service, they will not have to make any further calls for reimbursement as no invoice for service will be generated and the City will have the information required to schedule and act on repairing the deficiency.

Conclusion & Timelines

The next step in the process is to meet with interested parties in the plumbing community to present the proposed changes to them in a forum that allows them to ask questions and get the information that they may require to make changes to their processes or to get information to get better aligned to bid on our tender. The consultation meeting is anticipated to take place in February.

The City will issue a service contract for competitive bidding in March with an anticipated start date at the beginning of April. Corporate communications is compiling new reference material for customers to be posted on the website in March ahead of the implementation of the new procedure as well as hand-outs.