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City of Santa Barbara
Public Works Department

Memorandum

DATE: July 21, 2022

TO: Water Commission

VIA: Joshua Haggmark, Water Resources Manager

FROM: Amanda Flesse, Wastewater System Manager

SUBJECT: Septic-to-Sewer Update

Background

There are approximately 360 parcels within the City of Santa Barbara that have water service but do not have sewer service and are assumed to be utilizing septic systems. There is increased interest by property owners to connect to the City's sewer system and abandon their existing septic systems. Septic systems are privately owned and maintained onsite wastewater treatment systems (OWTS). Septic systems require space for a drain field and a redundant drain field as well as ongoing maintenance. Wastewater from the home gravity flows to a septic tank where the solids settle to the bottom. The liquid waste flows over a weir to the drain field which is typically composed of underground perforated pipes and gravel trenches. The soil acts as a natural filter for the wastewater. The remaining septic tank solids need to be pumped out regularly, otherwise, the solids will flow over the weir and clog the drain field. The needed frequency of pumping depends on the size of the septic tank and the amount of wastewater flowing from the residence. The typical life span of a septic system is about 30 years. Signs that a septic system has an issue or has failed are a strong rotten egg smell, water or sewer backup into the residence, slow drains, green spongy grass around the septic tank or drain field, trees, and shrubs growing well, pooling water in the drain field, or that the septic tank has not been pumped in more than five years with continuous occupancy.

Permitting

In order to have a septic system within the City limits, a homeowner must obtain a number of permits. In addition to obtaining a City permit, a septic system may also have to comply with the County of Santa Barbara Environmental Health Services (EHS) department and the County's Local Agency Management Program (LAMP). The EHS operates a program for the approval of the siting, design, operation, and maintenance of OWTS for individual residences. The LAMP program for Onsite Wastewater Treatment Systems document dated December 09, 2014, was revised July 21, 2015, and meets the State Water Resources Control Board Water Quality Control Plan OWTS Policy. The LAMP document defines the required septic tank size and area needed for the drain fields. On December 16, 2021, the City entered into a Memorandum of Understanding with the County of Santa Barbara regarding the design and

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inspection of OWTS within the City. Septic systems that need to be replaced within the City are now required to meet the County LAMP requirements.

When a septic system within City limits fails and public sewer is available, the property owner is required to connect to the City sewer system per City Ordinance No. 6002 and Municipal Code 14.44.010. If a public sewer is not available and septic issues cannot be managed within the current County LAMP regulations, the septic system must be replaced, or a public sewer extension is required to connect to the City's sewer system. Most existing septic systems do not meet the current LAMP requirements. When they fail, property owners are then required to replace their septic system with one that meets the current requirements or connects to the City sewer system.

There are multiple obstacles for property owners to connect to the City sewer system that all equate to time and money spent. If the property is located within the City, the property owner is responsible for obtaining a City sewer connection permit, a City building permit for the work on private property for the private sewer lateral, and a County Environmental Health Services septic system abandonment permit. Depending on the distance from the property to the nearest connection point to the City sewer system, a sewer main extension may be required. The property owner is responsible for the engineering, design, surveying, permitting, and construction costs for a sewer main extension, which must be constructed to the City standard. Property owners sometimes request to construct a long private sewer lateral rather than a City sewer main extension. However, sewer laterals are private infrastructure owned and maintained by the property owner. Private infrastructure is generally not allowed to run parallel in the public right-of-way only perpendicular to connect to an existing main. Extensive private lateral extensions are not always a viable option.

If the property is located outside City limits and the owner wants to connect to the City's collection system, the property owner must obtain a County Road Encroachment permit, a County building permit (rather than a City building permit), and approval from the County of Santa Barbara Local Area Formation Commission (LAFCO). Before approving City provision of sewer service, LAFCO may require the City to annex the property. If LAFCO does not require annexation, it will require the City and property owner to enter an Out-of-Agency Service Agreement where the property owner waives their right to protest future annexation.

Funding

Funding of a sewer main extension can be an expensive proposition with the cost varying greatly depending on depth, elevation, length, soil type, access, traffic, etc. On average construction costs in a public street run about \$250 per linear foot. This does not include the costs of a private lateral to connect the host to the public sewer main extension. Property owners routinely request that the City fund the sewer main extensions to their properties; however, that is not generally supported under Proposition 218. Revenue for sewer improvements is generated through wastewater bills of existing sewer customers and reflects the cost of providing sewer service. Property owners that have septic systems do not pay a

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City wastewater bill. Revenue from current ratepayers goes to fund operations, maintenance, and Capital Improvement Projects for existing infrastructure. The City currently has no budget line items for septic-to-sewer projects or sewer main extensions for private development nor is this supported by Proposition 218.

Property owners have also requested the City fund sewer main extensions up front and then pay the City back over time through their property taxes. Although there is no current process for the homeowner to utilize their property tax as payback, this can be accomplished with a partnership with the County. However, the primary concern with this proposal is the City fronting the money to pay designers, consultants, and contractors to design and construct a sewer main extension. The City does not currently collect money in excess of its operating costs to provide upfront money to pay for this type of new infrastructure. Funds to accomplish these tasks would need to come from additional Capital Improvement Project (CIP) budget. The CIP budget is already entirely allocated to funding the rehabilitation of existing sewer mains and completing needed treatment plant upgrades. In addition to the lack of funding, City staffing resources is limited to help property owners through the septic-to-sewer process. A study would need to be done but it is estimated that at least one full-time equivalent position would be needed should the City desire to develop a full-service septic-to-sewer program that would involve the City designing, constructing, and providing funding management options for sewer main extensions.

Next Steps

Staff is working on a septic-to-sewer pre-application form for interested property owners to complete and return to the City. Information collected on the form will allow the City to provide preliminary determinations on the proposed sewer main point of connection and if a sewer main extension is required. Staff is also developing a one-sheet overview describing the septic-to-sewer process for properties within the City and nearby properties outside City limits, as well as a guide to assist property owners with obtaining cost estimates. This information will help property owners decide if they want to proceed with a septic-to-sewer conversion, and provide them with enough information to start discussions with a registered engineer.

An important step is also for the City to work with the Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO) to clarify their requirements for Out-of-Agency Service Agreements versus annexations, and when each would be required.

Preliminary research has found some funding options for sewer main extensions which include a Clean Water State Revolving Fund loan, small community wastewater program loans, or an Infrastructure State Revolving Fund program loan. All these funding options require the City to be the loan applicant and responsible for the management of the loan. Depending on the number of loans, additional staffing or a third-party partnership will be needed to help manage this effort.