

**NEW BERN**



CITY OF NEW BERN

*Department of Public Utilities*

Information for Property  
Owners & Residents about  
Sewer Backup Incidents

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September 2014

## General Information

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The City of New Bern Utilities Department makes a concerted effort, through an intensive preventive maintenance program, to keep the over 400 miles of sewer system in a good state of repair. However, occasionally conditions develop within the system that may cause sewage to backup into a residence or business.

A sewer backup creates a stressful and emotional situation for you as the customer. In some cases it may cause health and safety concerns as well as significant property loss. A proper response to a sewer backup can greatly minimize property damage and diminish the threat of illness. The purpose of this document is to make clear the property owner's responsibilities concerning the sewage lines located on their property and the steps a property owner should take when a sewage backup occurs at a residence or business. This document also addresses some of the reasons why sewer backups occur and what can be done to prevent them.

The City of New Bern has a sewer crew whose sole duty is to inspect, clean and maintain sewers throughout the City on a regular basis. They are available on a 7-day a week, 24-hour a day basis to minimize the possibility of sewer problems. Unfortunately, because a sewer is not a closed secured system, many things put into the sewer can clog the system. Large amounts of grease, diapers, and other non-flushable paper products are common examples of items that cause blockage problems. While the City of New Bern has adopted rules prohibiting the discharge of any substance likely to cause a sewer obstruction and tries to educate the public about the problems they cause, it is a reality that these events happen and they are not always preventable.

The City of New Bern makes every effort to be responsive to a resident's needs and concerns when a sewer backup occurs. As with many other municipalities, the City cannot assume full financial responsibility for damages resulting from sewage backups or water damage that are the result of circumstances that are out of the City's control. Many homeowners' insurance policies exclude damage resulting from sewer backups. However, some insurance companies do provide sewer backup coverage. In the majority of cases, a special rider will need to be added to your homeowner's or renter's insurance policy to cover damages related to sewage backups or water damage. If you are concerned about the possibility of a sewer backup and want to insure that you are covered, the City urges you to check with your home insurer regarding the availability of sewer backup insurance.

## City and Customer Responsibilities

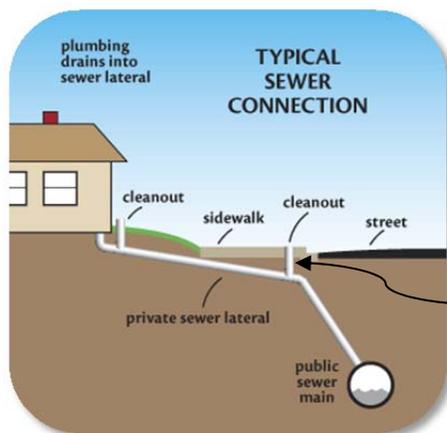
The City of New Bern is responsible for maintaining sewer mains and manholes, which are located in public rights-of-way (City and State maintained roads) and City owned easements. Property owners are responsible for maintaining the sewer service laterals, which extend from the building to the City's sewer main.

*Typical Sewer Service Lateral*



### **What is a sewer service lateral?**

A sewer service lateral or service line is the pipeline between your home and the City sanitary sewer main, which is usually located in the street. The sewer service lateral is owned and maintained by the property owner including any part, which may extend into the street or public right of way. It is common for the sewer service lateral to have clean-outs installed on the exterior of the building, which provide easy access for cleaning and clearing blockages within the line.



*Service Line Cleanout*



## **Contact Information**

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If you experience a sewer problem, please call the New Bern Water Resources Field Office and state that you are reporting a sewer emergency. Backed up sewer lines, water line breaks, and overflowing manholes are considered an emergency. After 4:00 p.m., on weekends and on holidays, please call the New Bern Utility Control Center to report your problem.

### **Water Resources Field Offices**

(252) 639-7541

### **Utility Control Center**

(252) 636-4070

**REMEMBER TO CALL THE CITY FIRST**, before calling a plumber. City crews will respond to your property and first check to see if the problem is located within the City's sewer system. If the problem is not in the City sewer main, and its determined that the problem is located within your sewer service lateral, then you will be advised to contact a plumber or a sewer/drain cleaning service. However, if you have an existing sewer clean-out along the street right-of-way, City crews may be able to provide assistance in clearing any blockage that is in the service line between the clean-out and the sewer main and camera the lateral to determine what may be causing the problem. If you do not have an exterior clean-out at your home, then you will need to contact a plumber to resolve the service line blockage and its recommend that the plumber also install a clean-out along the property line for future use.

If it is determined by the City or your plumber that the service lateral is broken within the street right-of-way, then the City will replace this portion of the service lateral within the right-of-way at no cost to the property owner.

Every sewer backup is unique and will require different responses, but there are some universal principles that should be applied to all situations where sewer has backed up into a home or business.

- If a dishwasher, washing machine, shower, bathtub, toilet or other water fixture is operating, shut it off immediately.
- Quickly close all drain openers with stoppers or plugs. Tub, sink and floor drains may need additional weight to keep them sealed. A string mop can be used to help plug toilets.
- Keep children and animals out of the affected area.
- Unplug all electrical appliances, small electrical devices on wet floor covering or other wet areas and turn off the circuit breakers supplying electricity to affected areas.
- Move any uncontaminated property away from the affected areas.

## Ways to Prevent Backups in Your Lateral and in the City Main

The property owners can do many things to prevent their service lateral from backing up. Remember too, that the very same things can help to prevent backups in the City main as well. If everyone would be careful about how they dispose of certain products, our systems would be a great deal more efficient, cause fewer backups, cost us all less money, and prevent a lot of misery.

- **Grease:** Cooking oil should be poured into a heat-resistant container and disposed of, after it cools off, in the garbage, not the drain. Some people assume that washing grease down the drain with hot water is satisfactory. This grease goes down the drain, cools off, and solidifies either in the drain, the property owner's line or in the main sewer. When this happens, the drain line constricts and may eventually clog.
- **Paper Products:** Paper towels, disposable (and cloth) diapers, and feminine products cause a great deal of problems in the property owner's lateral as well as in the City main. These products do not deteriorate quickly, as does bathroom tissue. They may become lodged in portions of the lateral/main, causing a sewer backup. These types of products should be disposed of in the garbage.
- **Roots and pipe joints:** Over the years, sewer pipe has been made from various materials such as Orangeburg, vitrified clay tile or PVC (polyvinyl chloride). Orangeburg and clay tile are brittle and more prone to intrusion from roots at their joints. PVC pipe is made from long lasting, durable plastic material that uses water tight seals at every joint and is more resistant to root intrusion. Shrubs and trees, seeking moisture, will make their way into sewer line cracks and pipe joints. These roots can cause extensive damage. They may start out small, getting into a small crack in the pipe; but as the tree or shrub continues to grow, so does the root. After time, this causes your sewer line to break, which in turn allows debris to hang up in the line, thus causing a backup. One way to prevent roots from entering your line is to replace your line and tap with new plastic (PVC) pipe. The other alternative is to be careful about planting greenery around your sewer line. If you have continuing problems with tree roots in your lateral, you may need to have them cut periodically.
- **Backflow Prevention Valves:** If the lowest drain of your home is below ground level, such as a basement floor drain, it may be more prone to one day be affected by a backup. One way to prevent sewage backup through such below ground areas is to have a plumber install a "backflow prevention valve" on the lowest drain(s) in your home. Your plumber can advise you the proper installation and maintenance procedures for backflow prevention valves.
- **Illegal Plumbing Connections:** Do not connect French drains, sump pumps and other flood control systems to your sanitary sewer. It is illegal, and debris and silt will clog your line. Consult a plumber to correct any illegal connections you may have on your property.

## **Frequently Asked Questions**

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**Q: What is the City's responsibility regarding private sewer laterals?**

**A:** *The property owner is fully responsible for maintaining adequate sewage flow to and through the sewer lateral, from the property structure to and into the City's sewer main. When failure or blockage of a sewer lateral occurs, the City crews will respond to check the sewer main to verify that the main is open and sewage is flowing. If the sewer main is found to be clear, it is the responsibility of the property owner to call a licensed plumber or drain cleaning service to correct the problem within the sewer lateral.*

*However, if the property owner has a sewer clean-out installed along the street right-of-way, City crews may be able to provide assistance in clearing any blockage that is in the service line between the clean-out and the sewer main and camera the lateral to determine what may be causing the problem. If the service line is found to be broken within the street right-of-way, then the City will replace the portion of the service line within the right-of-way at no cost to the property owner.*

**Q: What if my sewer backs up?**

**A:** *If you experience a sewer backup, call us at **252-639-7541** or **252-636-4070** after 4:30 p.m. and on weekends and holidays. The City will dispatch a maintenance crew to your address to determine if the stoppage is in the City main or your sewer lateral. If the problem is found to be in the sewer lateral then the City will provide assistance as outlined above. If the blockage is in the City main, we will fix it as quickly as possible and keep you informed about what is being done.*

**Q: What about the mess caused by a sewer backup?**

**A:** *A sewer backup can lead to disease, destruction of your valuables, damage to your house, and electrical malfunctions. Prompt cleanup of affected property can help minimize the inconvenience and damage. If the blockage is in the City main or the backup caused by any other City action, the City will arrange for a restoration contractor to clean and repair the affected areas of your home as quickly as possible.*

*If the blockage is found to be in the sewer lateral or the backup was caused by actions of the homeowner, then you should immediately arrange for the cleanup of your property:*

- *Take before-and-after photos of the affected areas*
- *Turn off electrical power to the affected area*
- *Itemize any property losses*
- *Wet-vacuum or remove spillage*
- *Mop the floors and wipe walls with soap and disinfectant*
- *Flush out and disinfect plumbing fixtures*
- *Steam clean or remove carpet and drapes*
- *Repair or remove wallboard or wall covering*
- *Clean up appliances or ductwork*