DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC WORKS

Improving the quality of life.

City of Sheboygan

COPING WITH SEWER BACKUPS

- **General Information**

A sewer backup creates a stressful and emotional situation for the homeowner/ renter. 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 City of Sheboygan makes every effort to be responsive to a resident's needs and concerns when a sewer backup occurs. The City has a sewer crew whose sole duty is to inspect, clean and maintain sewers on a daily 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 system, many things put into the sewer can clog the system. Large amounts of grease from restaurants and disposable (and cloth) diapers are two common items that cause problems. While the City of Sheboygan has adopted rules prohibiting the discharge of any substance likely to cause a sewer obstruction, and can try to educate the public about the problems they cause, there is really no way we can absolutely prevent this from happening. Other factors can cause backups as well, such as tree roots, which can grow into and obstruct the system.

Many homeowners' insurance policies exclude damage resulting from sewer backups. However, some insurance companies do provide sewer backup coverage. 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.

- **Contact Information**

If you experience a sewer problem, please call the Municipal Service Building at 459-3440 (459-3448 after 4 p.m. on Saturday, Sunday and Holidays) and state that you are reporting a sewer emergency. Backup up sewer lines, line breaks, sewage odors and overflowing manhole are considered an emergency.

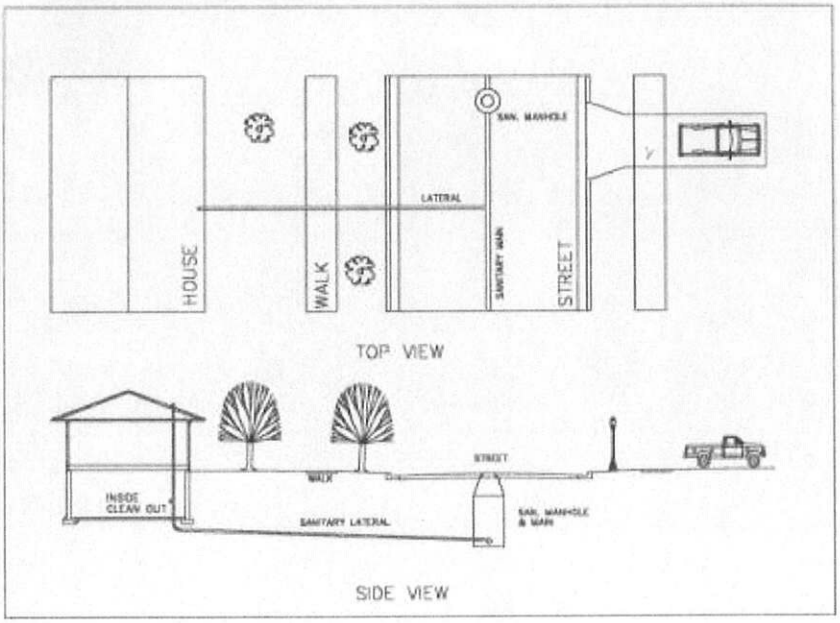
If the problem is in the sewer lateral, the homeowner or business is responsible for correcting th problem. The owner of the property is responsible for maintaining and cleaning the sewer later from the building (or home) to the City's sewer main, including the connection on the sewer main. Locating the lateral is also the responsibility of the property owner. The City of Sheboygan Building Inspection Department has records showing the location of these lateral lines through filed plumbing permits. Several plumbers also have special locating equipment, which will be helpful.

If the problem is in the sewer lateral, whom do you call for help? You will need to call a plumber or a sewer/drain cleaning service. Check your Yellow Pages or Business White Pages. The City of Sheboygan cannot make a recommendation. It may be in your best interest to obtain several estimates.

REMEMBER TO CALL THE MUNICIPAL SERVICE BUILDING FIRST before calling a plumber. We will check the sewer main and inform you of our findings. If the problem is not the City main you will be advised to contact a plumber or a sewer/drain cleaning service.

- **Lateral vs. Main**

What is a sewer lateral? A sewer lateral or house lateral is the pipeline between the City sanitary sewer main, usually located in the street, and the building. The sewer lateral is owned and maintained by the property owner including any part, which may extend into the street or public right of way.



More often than not, the cause of a backup in your lateral is from items that the line is not meant to handle, such as kid's toys, underwear, towels, diapers, paper products (other than toilet paper) keys and even false teeth. To avoid flushing these items, remember to close the toilet lid. What you flush down your toilet may not affect you, but it might cause problems for your neighbors! Another possible cause would be roots in your lateral. The lateral is the responsibility of the owner of the property from the house to the street.

- **Ways to Prevent Backups in Your Lateral and in the City Main**

The property owner can do many things to prevent his 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 line constricts, and eventually clogs.

- **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 become lodged in portions of the lateral/main, causing sewer backup. These products should be disposed of in the garbage.

- **Roots:** Shrubs and trees, seeking moisture, will make their way into sewer line cracks. 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 pipe. Root problems may be reduced by avoiding planting greenery on or around your sewer line. If you have continuing problems with tree roots in your lateral, you may have to have them cut out periodically.

- **Sewer Odor:** Another concern that property owners have is that they can smell sewer odors inside their house or building. There are many ways to prevent this from occurring. Under each drain in your plumbing system is a "P-Trap". If there is water in this pitting, odors or gasses from the sewer cannot enter through the drain from either the property owner's lateral or the City main. Periodically check to make sure that unused floor drains, sinks, etc. have water in the "P-Trap". Another way to prevent sewer odor is to ensure that the vents, which are located on your roof, are free from birds nests leaves, etc. When these vents are clear, the sewer odors will escape through these vents.

- **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.

- **Needles:** Unfortunately, some people dispose of hypodermic needles in the sewer system. The presence of these needles in the wastewater collection system presents special and possible deadly problems for wastewater collection and wastewater treatment employees. The proper method of disposal is to re-cap the needle and put it into a "sharps container". (This could be any rigid plastic container such as a bleach bottle....no milk bottles, please.) When it is full, tape the container security, and call your local pharmacy for advice on proper disposal methods. Please **DO NOT FLUSH NEEDLES OR THROW THEM INTO THE GARBAGE!**

- **Install a Backwater Prevention Valve:** A backwater valve can prevent or greatly reduce the possibility of a sewer backup. A backwater valve is a fixture installed into a sewer line, and sometimes into a drain line, in the basement of your building to prevent sewer backflows. A properly installed and maintained backwater valve works on a one-way system, sewage can go out, but cannot come back in. Property owners are responsible for the installation and maintenance of backwater valves. The cost to install one is dependent upon the type of plumbing in your home and the difficulty of installation. A qualified plumber can assist you in determining your needs.

- **Frequently Asked Questions**

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 stoppage of a sewer lateral occurs, the City crews will respond only 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. Verbal assistance and answers to questions can be received by calling the Department of Public Works at 459-3440.

Q: If I notice a foreign substance flowing into a storm drain inlet, whom should I call?

A: If you notice a foreign substance flowing into a storm drain inlet, please call the Municipal Service Building at 459-3440 (459-3448 after 4:00p.m. weekdays,on Saturdays, Sundays and Holidays or call the police department at 459-3333) to report the location.

Q: What if my sewer backs up?

A: If you experience a sewer backup, call us at 459-3440 (459-3448 after 4:00 p.m. weekdays, on Saturdays, Sundays and Holidays or call the Police Department at 459-3333). We will dispatch a maintenance crew to your address to determine if the stoppage is in the City main or your sewer lateral If the City main is found to be clear, it is the responsibility of the property owner to call a plumber or sewer/drain cleaning service to correct the problem. The property owner is responsible for maintaining adequate flow to and through the sewer lateral from the property structure to and into the City sewer main. 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 mess?

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.

You should immediately arrange for the cleanup of your property:

- Take before-and-after photos of the affected areas
- Itemize and 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