

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT SEWERS

Sewage is backing up into my house & overflowing from my drains. What should I do?

If these problems occur and you are not using any water outlets, there may be a problem in the City main. Call 922-4923 between 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. After 4:00 P.M. or during a weekend or a holiday call 922-4940 to request service.

If you are using household water outlets, turn them off. If the overflowing wastewater stops after turning off your outlets, you likely have a problem in your sewer lateral and you will need to call a sewer cleaning company. In the event of a back-up be sure to contact the City first.

What is a sewer lateral?

A sewer lateral (building sewer) is the privately owned and maintained sewer pipe connecting a building/dwelling to the public sewer main.

What should I do if sewage is overflowing from a sewer structure onto the ground?

If you notice any sewage flowing onto the ground call 922-4923 or 922-4940 to report it. Please give your name and a call back number and note exact address or location where the sewage is coming from. City crews will respond to investigate.

I have slow drainage through my toilets, drains. What can I do about it?

Call the City Water/Sewer Maintenance Division and we will check the mains. City crews will notify you if the problem is in the City main or not. If the City does not have a problem you will need to call a sewer cleaning company to clean your lateral.

What causes the blockage in my sewer?

There are three main causes for pipes and sewer blockages and while some are simple to detect and easy to prevent, some are hidden and can hardly ever be detected before the damage occurs.

1. Solid Flushes

The most common cause of sewage backup is a blockage of the lateral service pipe between the home and the city main. This is usually caused by solid objects, accidentally flushed down a household drain.

In home and office plumbing systems, the main cause is grease accumulation, hair, dirt, or solid materials, such as disposable diapers, sanitary napkins, broken dishware, garbage, and debris that are too large for wastewater pipes to handle.

Don't use the kitchen sink and garbage disposal for grease or food scraps. Vegetables, meat scraps, butter, cooking oils, and many other foods, deposit grease and solids that can build up in pipes and eventually create a blockage in your sewer line. Instead of putting food waste into a garbage disposal, scrape food waste from plates and pans into the garbage. Let melted oils used for cooking; solidify in a container (empty juice cartons or coffee cans work well) on the counter or in the refrigerator before placing them into the garbage.

This problem is usually a local problem and when you experience it, only water from your home will be backing up and the amount of backup will depend on the amount of water you are using. If you turn off the water, they will slowly drain but the problem is likely to return when you turn on the water again.

2. Structural Defects

Different structural defects can develop overtime and eventually cause a major damage to the system, leading to a serious overflow that will require a complete reconstruction of sewer lines.

Structural defects happen due to system deterioration in both pipes and manholes. These defects include problems with sewer service lines such as pipe collapse, sags in the line, cracks, holes, protruding laterals, misaligned pipe, and offset joints.

3. Root Infiltration

Tree roots are a major cause of backups. Tree roots can enter the service pipe at joints and travel a long way, causing blockages along the way. Tree roots can also create structural defects when they crack and break pipes as they grow.

There is a manhole cover that rattles every time a vehicle rolls over it. What can I do about it?

Report it to City Water/Sewer Maintenance Division at 922-4923.

What causes sewer odors inside the house?

Sewage has a natural tendency to produce odors; all sewers have odors. The plumbing system in your home is designed to prevent these odors from entering the house by using a vapor trap. If you are experiencing odors indoors, it is likely that there is a problem with the vapor trap.

When sewer gasses are present inside the home, usually one or more vapor traps has dried out. The water in a vapor trap will evaporate if the fixture is not used often; seldom-used bathrooms, floor drains or utility sinks are common odor sources. The simple solution is to periodically run water (one or two cups) into the drain to refill the trap.

What is the purpose of vapor traps?

Every water fixture in your house has a vapor trap. This "U" shaped pipe is clearly visible under sinks, and is present in some form on all lines draining to the sewage system. The "U" shape holds water, preventing gases from backing up from the sewer into the house through the sink drain. Occasionally this water may evaporate or siphon through the system allowing odors to enter, pouring water into the drains may correct the problem.

What is the purpose of the roof vent?

All houses have plumbing vents (also called a vent stack) that extend through the roof. These vents allow air to flow both in and out of the house plumbing system, helping water to flow through the pipes. Working in combination with the vapor traps, gases from the sewer system are safely vented.

What if the odor is outside the house?

If there is a sewer odor outside your home, report it to the City Water/Sewer Maintenance Division at 922-4923.

How do I file a claim if I have property damage caused by a sewer back up?

If you have a sewer back-up, it is important for you to clean and disinfect the area immediately.

The City is not equipped to have the crews clean. So you may wish to hire a professional service to clean it, but it may be at your own expense. We cannot commit to paying any

part of your expense. Keep in mind the blockage may be in the City main sewer line, however, we have no control of items placed into the line so liability is questionable.

You will need to submit an official claim to the City's insurance company and they will determine the liability on the part of the city and whether to pay or not to pay your claim.

You may also want to contact your own home owners insurance.

Please contact the Office of the City Clerk at 922-4480 or at 1st floor, Governmental Center, 400 Boardman, for further information.

Am I on the City sewer system or do I have a septic tank?

If you live inside the City limits you are probably on the City sewer system. Contacting the City Water/Sewer Maintenance Division at 922-4923 can confirm this.

If you live in an outlying township you could either be on the sewer system or have a septic tank. Call Grand Traverse County DPW at 995-6039 and give them your address. They will tell you what system you use for wastewater disposal. Septic tanks require pumping every few years depending on the number of people in your household. More people...more frequent pumping. Your local septic tank pumper can advise you.

Who maintains the sewer line?

The City maintains all sewer mains, which are located in the street or public utilities easements. Residents and business owner's own the lateral connections to the mains, laterals typically run on the owners' property and on streets or public areas to reach the main.

Property owners maintain their sewer lateral line, including the connection to the public sewer main. Locating the lateral is also a property owner's responsibility, although the City will attempt to assist by providing recorded information when available.

To find out where your sewer lateral is located, you can check with the City Water/Sewer Maintenance Division at 922-4923.

How do I report a problem?

To report a problem in the sewer main during the hours of 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., call the Water/Sewer Maintenance Division at 922-4923. After 4:00 p.m. or if it is during the weekend or a holiday Call 922-4940.