

# *Don't Bury Your Head in the Sand!* Education and Training for the Local Official

by Amy Santos

The typical local elected official is faced with multiple challenges on a daily basis. Particularly in rural communities, many officials work long hours for low compensation, driven not by financial incentives but by an altruistic desire to better their community. They are responsible for the municipality's community planning, economic development, regulatory compliance, fiscal operations, issuance of licenses and permits, public relations, public works, not to mention taxpayer complaints—and the list goes on and on. With this myriad of competing priorities, underground infrastructure, such as water or wastewater systems, often goes unnoticed until a problem surfaces.

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Water or wastewater systems are substantial capital assets that need to be well managed for future generations. Most systems were here long before the official was elected and will be here long after the official's term has ended. While the chief operator oversees the daily operations of the water or wastewater plant, the local official also has an obligation to ensure the plant's success by becoming an active, knowledgeable steward of those capital assets. Failing systems pose threats to public health and the environment, which may, in turn, negatively impact a municipality's financial bottom line. Many areas in upstate

New York rely heavily on seasonal tourism; maintaining a pristine environment and providing pure drinking water are essential components in attracting visitors.

Local officials are becoming increasingly aware that their municipality's water or wastewater infrastructure is in need of attention. This year, the American Society of Civil Engineers awarded the nation's water and wastewater infrastructure a grade of D-. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA) issued the *Clean Water and Drinking Water Infrastructure Gap Analysis* in September 2002, projecting a capital payment gap as large as \$450 billion over the next 20 years for water and wastewater systems. New York is facing a \$35 billion gap over the next 20 years, according to the recent state needs survey.

As municipal water or wastewater systems age, significant capital investments must be made in order to physically maintain (or replace) the current system, comply with increasingly stringent regulations protecting the environment and public health, and provide quality service to new and existing customers. Capital projects are complex undertakings, particularly in this new era of reduced federal subsidization, inflated materials costs, and stagnant household income levels.

On the local level, what can the elected official do? Burying your head in the sand is not a reliable, long-term management strategy; neither is waiting for a grant to arrive in your mailbox. Responsible leaders are searching for opportunities to be proactive, to learn more about water and wastewater management, to investigate alternative financing methods and technical assistance, and to begin to communicate that rates will be rising to cover the full cost of running the system. Substantive education and training is needed to build management capacity, promote sound stewardship practices, and plan for the next generation.

For the past two years, the Syracuse University Environmental Finance Center (SUEFC), New York Water Environment Association (NYWEA), New York State



Department of Environmental Conservation, (NYSDEC), and New York Rural Water Association (NYRWA) have worked together to address this growing need, bringing the "Panel on Wastewater for Local Representatives" to various locations across New York State.

Beginning in 2004, these innovative educational sessions reached out to local officials and other nontechnical staff, emphasizing that municipal wastewater treatment plants are deserving of attention; they represent a considerable capital investment that provides a critical public service. Three panels were held in the fall of 2004, each filled to capacity, involving a total of 80 attendees, which included mayors, supervisors, clerks, treasurers, and sewer board members.

The 2004 program enabled participants to better understand and manage their capital investment by conveying technical information in layman terms. A basic overview of wastewater "lingo" and treatment processes was presented to encourage officials to communicate with technical operators about management and operational issues on a routine basis. The importance of protecting, maintaining, and providing adequate financial support was highlighted. Representatives from agencies that fund wastewater facility improvements, such as the New York State Environmental Facilities Corporation, USDA Rural Development, New York State Energy Research and Development Authority, and New York Department of State Appalachian Regional Commission, spoke about grant/loan availability and technical assistance opportunities. Participants left with a clear sense of environmental responsibilities—the need to maintain compliance and communicate with the public. A facilitated discussion was utilized at the end of each panel to provide attendees with an interactive forum to ask questions and raise concerns.

The comments and feedback received from the 2004 panels were constructive and positive, confirming a clear need to continue the training effort. One participant expressed the following: "Each speaker provided me with information that made me realize how important it is to support the staff at our wastewater facility. Also I have a renewed interest in helping to improve our community."

Through a grant from the NYSDEC, four panels were held in 2005 involving over 100 participants. Operators attended with their elected official to encourage direct communication between the technical and administrative sides of comprehensive wastewater management. The length of each panel was increased to provide ample time for participant questions and discussion, and an interactive case-study exercise was added. Three "basic" sessions, modeled on the 2004 panels, were held in 2005, two of which were modified to complement the New York cofunding workshops. In July, an "advanced" session, focusing on capital planning and regulatory compliance, was held. Again, the evaluations confirmed the success of the panels and a continuing need for education and training.

The comments stated that the sessions were concise, valuable, and informative.

To gather additional data about the training needs and interests of municipal officials with regard to wastewater management, the SUEFC administered a survey to over 1,700 municipal officials in the summer of 2005. The survey results will be used to guide location selection and supplementary topics for additional panels in 2006, highlight municipalities eager to attend training opportunities, and identify target audiences for future sessions.

Additionally, through funding from the NYSDEC, a manual on wastewater management will be produced by the SUEFC, NYWEA, and NYRWA. The manual, designed for nontechnical staff, will incorporate material from the basic and advanced panel sessions. Supplementary information, with an emphasis on capital improvement planning and asset management, will also be included. The manual is anticipated to be available by the summer of 2006. Plans for next year's wastewater panels are under way.

Take advantage of these no-cost training sessions! For more information about the upcoming panels, please contact the

Environmental Finance Center at 866-536-4770, or you can visit our website at [www.maxwell.syr.edu/efc](http://www.maxwell.syr.edu/efc).

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