

Scan + Paul & Carol
Kathy Weinsaft

Training Specialist
kweinsaft@warws.com
307-262-3943

The Road to Sustainability

A woman is never a prophet in her own state. Never the less, for the last 20 plus years I have traveled through Indian Country and both remote and rural Wyoming preaching the gospel of sustainability for our water, wastewater and solid waste utilities. The definition of sustainable according to Merriam Webster is:

1 : capable of being sustained 2a : of, relating to, or being a method of harvesting or using a resource so that the resource is not depleted or permanently damaged sustainable techniques sustainable agriculture b : of or relating to a lifestyle involving the use of sustainable methods sustainable society.

My definition is much shorter and less complicated. Are the services I am providing going to be available to my children and their children? Native Americans have their own version and definition of sustainability. They believe that any decision they make should take into consideration the impact that it will have on the 7th generation ahead of them. Is this happening? Not so you could tell.

In the last week I have gotten a request for technical assistance from a system that was put into the ground 65 years ago and pretty much forgotten. They have no reserves and have done only minimal maintenance. Another system that I did a rate study for five years ago contacted me to update the information that the rates I suggested were based upon. I give this system high fives for doubling their rates way back then, but to even cover their O & M costs they needed to raise them a whole lot more and I am pretty sure it has not improved over the last half decade.

I could relate a hundred more stories just like these two, and some a whole lot worse. It would be pointless and I am pretty sure there isn't one of you reading this that couldn't add to my story collection. Instead, let's put our heads together and figure out why we are in this position and how are we going to crawl out of this hole. In my opinion, it is much better to light one candle than to curse the darkness.

Making decisions that put your system on a sustainable path is hard. Even worse, these decisions cannot be made unilaterally. It requires the buy-in of your decision makers and your stake holders. Let's face it, nobody wants to pay more for anything, and elected officials hate bringing up the topic, let alone actually raising rates. This is actually a rational fear in some cases. I have seen more than one Mayor impeached or rebuffed at the ballot box for trying to do the right thing. It doesn't have to be this way, but it requires a commitment to provide a lot of education, information and the use of available tools and resources to give stakeholders a reason to support higher rates.

Before you can ever get to the point of asking your stakeholders to support sustainable rates, you need to know what those rates need to be. Inevitably, elected officials want to define those rates by what is being charged down the road at a nearby community. **This is the absolute worst way to try to accomplish your sustainability goals.** To begin with, this is answering a technical question with a political answer. This sort of mismatch almost always ends badly.


Secondly, the system you are comparing yourself to probably isn't sustainable either. Rates should be set based on the needs of your own unique system, and that will be dependent on the quality and type of your source water, the physical condition of your system's assets, the level of operator your system is required to have, the amount of pipe you have in the ground and the number of taps you have available to divide the costs over.

Whether you are providing services in Denver or remote Wyoming, there are some fixed costs to providing utility services. It is just a whole lot cheaper per tap if you have 500,000 households and businesses to divide the costs over. We in Wyoming have no economy of scale.

So what costs do you have that you need to spread over the available taps? There is no way to answer this question without doing some sort of cost accounting and asset management.

Stay with me. It is not as bad as it sounds.

Cost accounting is nothing more than tracking the expenses that are incurred in providing a particular service. Where



Cavin Noddings, PE, Leed AP
President
Cavin@YWaterWorks.com

547 S 20th St W, Suite 1
Billings, MT 59102
PO Box 81348
Billings, MT 59108
P 406-633-2316
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Xve run into trouble is that most of us do more than one thing and the equipment and other things we use are probably doing double or triple duty as well. If your community is lucky enough to have a backhoe, it is probably being used in the water system, the wastewater system, the cemetery, and other programs as well.

Think of each one of these activities as a cost center. It is really important to isolate the costs of not only your time, but the time of your clerk, shared equipment and overhead expenses. The method you do this with does not have to be really sophisticated and can be as simple as jotting down what you have done for a couple of weeks and what you used to accomplish the tasks. It is going to be really important to bring your clerk into the process for lots of reasons and having her to work with as you begin to allocate expenses to specific programs is one of the most important.

A majority of the costs you are going to capture in this process are going to be related to operations, but what about capital costs? Those are the costs associated with the hardware of your system. Nothing is designed to last into eternity. This is where an asset management plan comes into play. These can be way complicated, but they sure don't have to be.

Begin with an inventory. This inventory should not only include valves, hydrants, pumps and treatment facilities, but should also include what you have in the ground. You can do this as you go. Every time you touch something in your system, write it down. Take note of its condition. Heck, you can even take a picture of it with your phone to help jog your memory. How old is it? How critical is it to your ability to provide services? It can be as simple as rating it as High, Medium or Low importance.

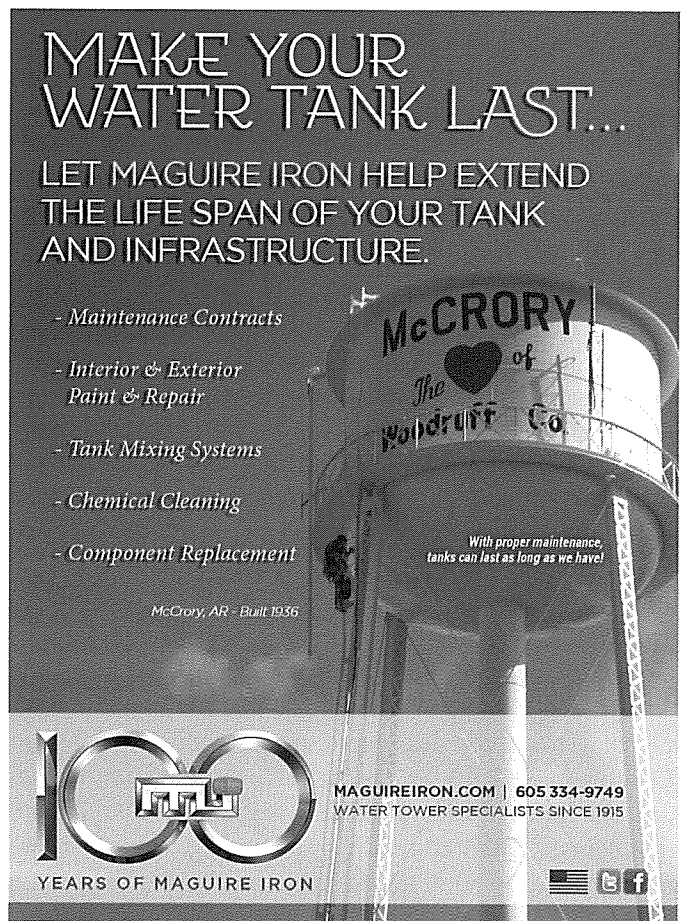
If you have the time, it will be important to document what the replacement cost of each piece would be. This information will help you document the replacement cost of your system and help you determine what your system needs to be putting into reserves on an annual basis. I am going out on a limb here, but I am willing to bet that you, along with your decision makers, will be shocked at what it would cost to replace what you have. It can be breath taking.

Remember, **the more information you can gather the better.**

It will be hugely important in helping you explain to your stakeholders why your system is not sustainable at the rates currently being charged. Your customers want to know that the rates they are paying are justified and equitable. You and your decision makers need to know that they are defensible. Don't get overwhelmed by it. It may not be easy, but it is doable. Take small steps and consider any

forward momentum a victory. The road to sustainability is a journey, not a destination. If you need help getting ready for the trip or roadside assistance, give me a call. I would be honored to make this journey with you.

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