



Small Community Wastewater Systems:

Communicating with Your Community

Your task force has been working hard to identify the issues and the best solutions to your community wastewater issues. But if this isn't communicated clearly to your community, all may be lost. The community provides input and feedback, and the committee researches, discusses and advises the community on possible solutions.

The goal of communication is to keep the community fully engaged, and to keep residents up to speed on the progress made and decisions opportunities. The committee has two roles: communicate the progress to the community, and listen carefully to the responses of the residents.

Communications—Outreach to the Community

- Look for ways to provide community members with both informal and formal input. Informal may be a conversation on the street corner or in the coffee shop. Formal input can be gathered via public meetings, surveys or other methods.
- Make sure all interests and “sides” receive equal information.
- Consider a regular newsletter. A committee should be appointed by the task force to collect articles, prepare and distribute the newsletter. The newsletter should have announcements of public meetings, explain surveys, include minutes of task force meetings, update the community on progress and decisions made. “Regular” needs to be defined by the task force—could be quarterly or bi-monthly in the beginning when progress is slow. As the pace of the project picks up, so should communications with residents. To hold costs down, consider email copies to all who can receive, mail to the rest. Look for sponsors and/or grant funding to cover the costs of duplication and distribution. Costs of distribution can be minimized if newsletters are hand delivered to residents.
- Utilize every public route available: local weekly newspapers, local radio, flyers on bulletin boards. Think about places where the people you need to reach can be found—local stores, churches, gas stations—where do they go?
- Who has newsletters in your area that reach all residents—can you include information? This may be a lake association, the soil and water conservation district, a newsletter sponsored by the county Water Plan dollars, a township or other group. Perhaps the school district will let you include information in their newsletter periodically.
- Establish a bulletin board devoted to this issue in a place people regularly go – gas station, grocery store, local school, meeting place, etc. Keep current info there, and update often.
- Establish a way for residents to contact committee members easily, and in a comfortable manner. Include phone and email information.
- Reach every resident regularly via newsletter or personal contact – at least BEFORE major action is taken .
- Phone trees still work—few methods are more effective than personal contact.
- An effective method to reach every resident is with mailbox stuffers, placed in the free shopper boxes (not the Postal Service mail boxes). Check first with your local shopper to obtain permission to use these boxes.
- An alternative that is very effective is a door or window hanger. At the most, these are one page; 1/2 page is effective. They can simply be stuck in resident's front doors, or under the windshield wipers on cars in a public parking lot. Door hangers often have a string or cut out to allow them to be hung on door knobs. These work very well to announce a meeting, or to give a short update.
- Mailbox stuffers and door hangers are a way to involve youth in your program, and help them feel a part of the community. They may do it as a contribution to the project, or for incentives such as pizza, ice cream or movie coupons, or plain old cash.
- Surveys can serve two purposes—the committee can collect needed information, and share updates with the community. If a survey is done, be sure to share the results promptly with all residents.

Make Criticism Productive

Most people consider criticism entirely negative. Criticism should include both positive reinforcement and a statement of what needs to be improved. However, most people have only experienced criticism in ways that are blaming and shaming. We are usually not taught to give criticism in positive ways.

Use the “I” statements in communication. For example, say “I feel angry right now,” rather than “You make me so mad.” But an “I” statement can be just as blaming and shaming as a “you” statement. A productive “I” statement should:

- * Use “I” rather than “you”
- * Include a feeling word
- * Include a cause of feeling

Consider indicating specifically what is needed to alleviate the problem at hand. End with a question that targets the discussion toward addressing the concern causing the problem. Here’s an example:

“You” statement (not the best approach): You have not been participating in these meetings before, and now you want to change our plans.”

“I” statement (much better) I realize it has been difficult for many people to attend our meetings, but we have had to move ahead with some of our decisions. We need to keep our project moving to take advantage of some of the resources available to us. Can we talk after the meeting and share more of our reasonings with you?

The Power of Body Language

Many people have no idea how powerful body language can be. About 90 percent of any situation is perception. Pay attention to your body language in addition to what you say. Be sure that your body language and words give the same message. If you say, “I’m not angry,” when your voice is raised and your fists are clenched, no one is likely to believe you. Saying one thing and doing another gives confusing messages, and may cause you to lose credibility.

Showing Respect in Communication

Saying something respectfully will be more productive in any communication. That means phrasing your messages in a positive way, and not directing negative comments to someone’s personality. Instead of saying,

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| “That’s not true” | try | “Where did you get your information?” |
| “you forgot to say” | try | “I’d like to add” |
| “what a dumb idea” | try | “how would that idea work?” |
| “you’re wrong” | try | “here’s another way to look at it” |

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Source: *Small Community Wastewater Solutions: A Guide to Making Treatment, Management and Financial Decisions.* BU-07734. University of Minnesota Extension Service, 2002.

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