

Storm Sewers Are Not Garbage Cans

By Mike Barhorst

The citizens of the City of Sidney are the owners of tremendous assets. Some are easily visible – City Hall, Tawawa Park, the Water Treatment Plant, the Police Department, the Sidney City Airport, the fire stations, the Wastewater Treatment Plant, Graceland Cemetery – are all in plain view.

However, the vast majority of the City's most important infrastructure remains out of sight. That infrastructure is buried beneath local roadways and in other rights-of-way. It consists largely of water lines, sanitary sewers and storm sewers.

The City of Sidney has more than 123 miles of water mains (excluding the lines serving the new water source, more than 125 miles of sanitary sewers, and more than 77 miles of storm sewers. The initial cost of installing these utilities was more than \$39.9M! Replacement cost of the lines would obviously be far higher – current estimates would place that cost at more than \$290M!

In this column, I wanted to write to again remind both residents and visitors to our community that neither the storm sewer nor the sanitary sewer systems are one and the same. In fact, both systems serve very different purposes.

Sanitary sewers are designed to remove and treat waste water that flows down the drain of the sink, the toilet, shower, kitchen sink or other inside drain. Stormwater sewers are designed to remove stormwater following a precipitation event; stormwater is not treated – waste water is treated.

When rain, snow or other precipitation falls on the ground, it either soaks into the ground or begins moving overland toward a river or stream. As it moves over the land and downhill, it becomes stormwater.

As water moves over rooftops, driveways, yards, streets, and parking lots, it picks up pollutants and carries them along. Most runoff is directed to a storm drain that drains to the river or stream. Thus, any pollutants on the land will be carried to the river potentially harming wildlife and possible drinking water sources.

In 1987, Congress amended the Clean Water Act of 1972 (itself an amendment of the Federal Water Pollution Control Act of 1948 – but that's another story) requiring the United States Environmental Protection Agency to establish requirements for stormwater discharges. The new legislation was not immediately applicable to the City because of our population.

In August 2006 the City of Sidney submitted its Stormwater Management Plan to the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency (OEPA) as one of the requirements necessary to obtain a stormwater discharge permit. In 2007, the City implemented a Stormwater Fee to provide funding for the activities related to this new federal mandate.

In June 2009 the City of Sidney received its National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) Permit allowing it to discharge stormwater into the Great Miami River. One condition of the NPDES permit requires the City to submit an annual report to the OEPA outlining public education/outreach efforts, public involvement/participation, illicit discharge detection and elimination, construction site runoff control, and pollution prevention activities conducted by the City during the reporting period. Those reports are regularly submitted by the Utilities Director.

You may have seen the “Storm Drains...Are Not Garbage Cans” billboards; you may have taken part in the Clean Sweep of the Great Miami River to remove debris from the City's main source of drinking water; or, you may have passed the booth at the Shelby County Fair distributing information about water quality. All of these efforts are part of the public outreach/education efforts required by the OEPA.

By now, you are undoubtedly also aware of the City-wide program to work with residents to eliminate stormwater inflow and infiltration (I & I) into the City's sanitary sewer system. This is a long-term process, but one that is already demonstrating benefits. This program was agreed to by the City as part of the negotiations that decreased the cost of the mandated improvements at the Wastewater Treatment Plant from more than \$78M to \$12.5M!

There are other near-term ways every resident can prevent stormwater pollution. Those include stormwater good housekeeping best practices such as:

- never allowing any pesticides, fertilizers or other chemicals, including paints, to be washed down storm drains.
- never allowing grass clippings or other yard wastes to be washed down storm drains.
- never disposing of animal waste, litter or motor oil in storm drains
- washing vehicles in your yard, not on concrete where the soapy car wash water will end up in the storm drain.
- utilizing a rain garden or rain barrel to collect stormwater for landscaping maintenance, and using slow watering techniques such as soaker hoses.
- repairing vehicle oil leaks immediately. When parked on the street or in your driveway, oil leaked onto the pavement will eventually be washed into the storm drains.
- not dumping the contents of your vehicle's ash tray on the street or in a parking lot. It can take up to ten years for a cigarette butt to biodegrade.
- not dumping your child's diaper(s) along streets or in parking lots. No one knows for sure, but it is estimated that it takes up to 500 years for a disposable diaper to biodegrade - long after your children, grandchildren and great, great, great grandchildren will be gone.

I would encourage all residents, business owners and visitors to our community to join in the effort to keep the Great Miami River "an exceptional warm water habitat" by taking steps to reduce source stormwater pollution in our community. As political activist Eldridge Cleaver once said; "If you are not a part of the solution, you are part of the problem."

Put another way, "Be the change you wish to see in the world" as civil rights activist Mahatma Gandhi was fond of saying. Each of us taking small steps to eliminate stormwater pollution will enable our lakes, rivers and streams to remain a healthy source of clean water. Those same steps will also help preserve our lakes, rivers and streams as valuable recreational outlets.