



Senate Natural Resources Committee

COVID-19 Updates

January 13, 2021

Testimony by Bob Fischer, Green Mountain Water Environment Association, Government Affairs Chair/New England Water Environment Association Vice President elect

Background

Hi, I am Bob Fischer, Water Quality Superintendent for the City of South Burlington. I am also the Green Mountain Water Environment Association Government Affairs Chair and a Past President of the Association. [GMWEA](#) is the Vermont Trade Association of approximately 500 members encompassing Water, Wastewater and Stormwater Operators, Consulting Engineers, Regulators, Administrators and Scientists. I am a Biologist. I am also the incoming Vice President for the 6 New England State Association <https://www.newea.org/> with over 2,300 members. This is under the umbrella of the National organizations: WEF <https://www.wef.org/> for Wastewater founded in 1928 and AWWA <https://www.awwa.org/> for drinking water founded in 1881. I am also a member of the Citizens Advisory Committee on Lake Champlain's Future <https://www.lcbp.org/about-us/how-we-work/citizen-advisory-committees/vermont-cac/>. The Government Affairs Committee consists of members of GMWEA many that you may know such as Jeff Wennberg, VLCT <https://www.vlct.org/> such as Karen horn and the Vermont Rural Water Association <https://vtruralwater.org/> including Executive Director Liz Royer who gave me extensive input on this testimony. The 94 Wastewater systems and hundreds of Water Systems in the State are protectors of health and the environment and have been affected by this terrible virus in numerous ways.

COVID-19

- EPA has recognized that Water and wastewater personnel are essential workers who operate and maintain critical public health infrastructure. These are very complicated systems, generally the largest investment for a municipality and they require licensed operators with years of training <https://dec.vermont.gov/watershed/wastewater/treatment-pollution-abatement-facility-operator-license>
- Like many utilities, water and wastewater systems have lost revenue during the pandemic because customers have struggled to pay their bills. However, most water and sewer utilities were initially left out of the Vermont Arrearage Assistance Program (VCAAP), which the Legislature created in July using CARES Act funds. Some funding did become available in November, but this does not cover the continued need of many water and wastewater systems. For instance, here in South Burlington delinquencies average approximately 6% and the most recent numbers I have seen have them currently at 26%. For many of the smaller water systems, just a small increase in delinquencies can cause operating difficulties. Stowe is seeing a 30% reduction in commercial water/sewer usage and revenues. Stowe also unfortunately disproportionately relies on commercial usage rates. Shelburne has seen an increase in delinquencies and have 10 accounts that have

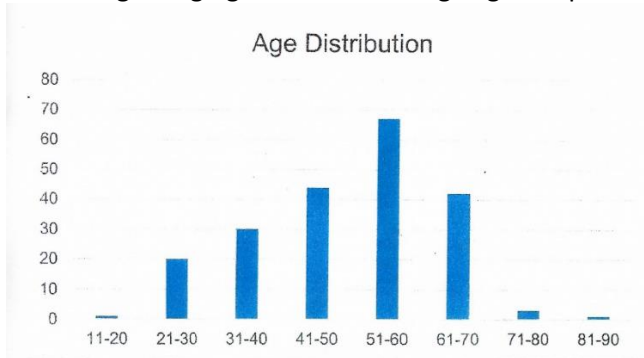


applied for COVID-19 relief but doesn't have the exact numbers in this short timeframe. I reached out to the Committee when I was invited yesterday afternoon and responses are still coming in. Megan Moir, Burlington Water Resource Division Director just responded: We definitely experienced an overall decrease in volumetric revenue (primary source of revenue) even with the balancing offset of some increased residential usage (stay at home) and irrigation water due to the dry summer. The decrease is driven by the decrease in the commercial sector and institutional (uvm, Champlain, uvmmc). We built a FY21 budget on the premise that we would likely have to dip into our cash reserves. We also pulled a revenue anticipation note to cover delayed collections. They have also cut back on spending and capital projects. She says the COVID-19 arrearage program was great and would love to see it expanded.

- VCAAP only provides a fraction of the money needed to meet revenue deficits of smaller water utilities. In budgeting for next year, many systems are having to reduce staff hours, defer maintenance on critical infrastructure, and postpone necessary construction projects and improvements. Our drinking water and wastewater systems are essential for the protection of public health and have maintained their services throughout the pandemic. Most are not optimistic about the next six-month period and are planning to see a larger proportion of unpaid bills and more businesses close in their communities.
- Water and wastewater systems also continue to be subject to a shutoff moratorium, established by the Legislature in March 2020 (Act 92). Although not shutting off service for people that have recently become unemployed is important, shutoffs are often the only option for community water systems who struggle to collect payment from habitual delinquent customers.
- The Legislature needs to ensure that all water and wastewater systems and their customers are included in any future COVID assistance programs.
- With decreasing revenues and increasing regulation, many water and wastewater systems are having capacity challenges. Any proposed legislation needs to consider the scientific feasibility of testing, the unintended consequences of new regulations, and create a funding mechanism to cover all associated costs. As a society, we cannot afford to continue to stress these entities that are essential to protection of public health and the environment. The one thing I have learned of which I know no one more so than this committee knows is that there are no easy solutions. Every action can have unintended consequences. For example, these sewerage facilities can generally be modified to address new contaminants but not without large costs. Septage processing capacity is a major issue in Vermont. Talking with a major septage hauler yesterday they had their largest year ever as many people are staying home. P&P hauled 4.9 million gallons of septage in 2019 and 5.6 million gallons in 2020 their most ever. 55% of Vermonters are on septic tanks that is the highest proportion by population in the United States. The average is 24%. Although modern mound systems are better than older systems let's take PFAS or microplastics. While it can be treated for residents on sewerage systems where do you think it goes from a septic tank? Into the ground surrounding the system. Land Application. Here at South Burlington for example total suspended solids averaged 1.4 mg/L from our Airport Parkway facility last year. A well-run septic system discharges over one hundred times that not to mention the 10-15% of septic systems that are failing per Federal estimates. Phosphorus? The two facilities in South Burlington servicing 20,000 South Burlington residents and approximately 2,000 Colchester residents discharge as much phosphorus daily to the environment as 35 residents not on a treatment system. The biosolids produced by the facilities have to go somewhere. Everyone poops 410 lbs. a year on average. I'm probably more like a Volkswagen.



- There are increased greenhouse gas emissions and leachate from Coventry and from increased trucking if South Burlington's biosolids are landfilled not to mention potentially a \$300,000 increase in annual costs for 6,200 connections.
- Affordability was already an issue especially for people on fixed incomes. A study by Michigan State University funded by the National Science Foundation: <http://msutoday.msu.edu/news/2017/affordable-water-in-the-us-a-burgeoning-crisis/> claims nearly 36 percent of U.S. households will be unable to afford water in five years if water rates continue rising at projected amounts. There are several ways to calculate affordability but the traditional method is based on households Median Household Income (MHI) which is usually obtained from the US Census Bureau. The Total of Bills for One Year for a Residential Customer / Median Household Income of All Customers = Percent MHI is used by utilities in rate-making, agencies in determining eligibility for funding, EPA in administering certain regulations, and advocacy groups and researchers in analyzing affordability of rates in local and regional areas. Generally anything above 2.5% can impact the ability of a municipality to borrow funds. Using this method in Vermont communities such as Johnson Village and Barre have current MHI's of 3.1% and 2.9% respectively
- Other Covid problems. Wipes clog pipes. It is on DEC's website: <https://dec.vermont.gov/watershed/wastewater> Disposable wipes are generally not disposable in a sewer system. It is hard to quantify as operators generally don't pick through the rags (industry term) as they struggle to clean a pump they need back in service asap. Nationally there have been attempts to ban them in certain municipalities such as DC but litigation has followed from the industry.
- Protecting an Aging staff. The average age of operators in Vermont is 56.



- We have been very lucky so far but these are very complicated systems, each one unique and licensed operators who can operate these facilities are generally all employed in the industry already. Operators are essential employees. Our front line health workers are 1A but in Vermont vaccinations will be age based after that while in many other states operators are in group 1B.
- Middlebury for example is operating on split shifts but they are losing 10 hours per day. Building inspections have stopped unless its an emergency. We have been here at the facilities since the pandemic started. Stowe is splitting their operators shifts also as are many systems. The only thing we have discovered here is that with 32 pumpstations and 2 large advanced facilities operated by a staff of 7 really the only non-essential person here is me. The two Chief Operators have over 35 years of experience each. They are incredible. AP put out 0.04 mg/L of Phosphorus last year. The influent was over 9 mg/L.
- PPE has been difficult to come by.



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- Here in South Burlington we are taking part in the National Covid sewerage testing and tracking program through the CDC and HHS.
- VT WARN (Vermont's water and wastewater mutual aid network) was revived in March at the start of the pandemic. A refreshed steering committee has recruited new members and created a website where systems can update contact information and request assistance through an online form. VT WARN has distributed 10,000 cloth masks provided by FEMA, advocated for vaccine prioritization, and partnered with EPA and ANR to continue to increase emergency preparedness.