

# The Importance of Asset Management and the Strategic Water Quality Initiatives Program

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As a region and a state, we have spent billions of dollars on underground infrastructure, but billions more are needed to ensure that the aging infrastructure doesn't collapse on our watch.

The federal government has directly invested more than \$72 billion in the construction of publicly owned sewage treatment plants since passage of the Clean Water Act in 1972. Nevertheless, the physical condition of many of the nation's 16,000 wastewater collection and treatment systems is poor. That's primarily due to a lack of investment in plant, equipment and other capital improvements over the years.

The EPA estimates that the nation must invest \$390 billion over the next 20 years to replace existing systems and build new ones to meet increasing demands.

Oakland County, as with our entire state is diverse. There are cosmopolitan urban areas and bucolic rural areas. Consequently, our approach can be easily expanded to cover urban and rural areas throughout the state.

Our urban areas, with their large customer bases and greater concentration of higher paying jobs, usually are in a better position than rural areas to address some of these environmental challenges. They have the benefit of an economy of scale. On the other hand, they demand greater capacity and that demand comes with threats to the environment. Consequently, it is important that management of growth plays into this equation.

Our rural areas, on the other hand, need both technical and financial assistance to move beyond the current crisis. They need innovative, cost-effective, easily manageable and sustainable solutions. Because they usually don't enjoy economies of scale, they can benefit from consolidation and merges of smaller systems where feasible and the use of alternative and cost-effective systems of wastewater disposal.

That's where CAMS, the Collaborative Asset Management System comes in. CAMS is a new vision for providing customer service in Oakland County's public works community. It's a standardized, countywide infrastructure management system that will allow Oakland County and its local units of government to proactively manage assets and mitigate long-term costs associated with the operation and maintenance of critical infrastructure such as water systems, wastewater and storm drains and even roads. Our initial studies show that over the next six years, the savings to Oakland County residents will be about \$42 million.

In addition, regional water and wastewater systems need to improve service and reduce costs. In rural areas, that may mean collaborating with neighboring systems. On large-scale urban systems, it means greater cooperation and regional input into the governance of the system. There is strength in numbers.

One other aspect of our business that tends to be overlooked is our difficulty in attracting and sustaining quality personnel. We must participate in the educational process and work with local high schools, community colleges and universities to show that water and wastewater issues are, in fact, environmental issues. College students are far more likely to get excited about the environment than they are about water and sewage. We need to advocate and promote intern programs and demonstrate how our industry is a growth field. According to CareerBuilder.com, jobs in our industry are the hot jobs for the future, right up there with computer application developers. Water and sewage system services are projected to be the only growing segment in the utilities field. In fact, jobs in this area will increase 46 percent by 2012.

We need to be participating at the high school level as well, providing career fairs to educate students on the importance of our industry. And, while we're at it, we can talk to elementary school children as well. In Oakland County we're already doing that in our environmental programs in cooperation with the Cranbrook Institute of Science with fifth graders.