

# A Brief History of Sewage Treatment in Albuquerque

Last Updated Tuesday, 23 December 2008

A lot of things have changed in Albuquerque since the first sewers were installed in the late 1800s. Technically, the basic concept of a water-carried waste system is still the same. Water flowing by gravity is used to get wastes out of the house and then out of town. The thing that has changed is what is done with the wastewater after it reaches the edge of town. In other words, how it is treated and why.

That is one purpose of our master planning effort. How will the city collect the wastewater from the present and future homes and businesses, separate the water and the waste, and return both to the environment? Will it be safe, cost-effective, convenient and sustainable? Will it meet all present and future regulations? Will it operate in concert with other city, county and neighboring plans, strategies and services?

To understand what is needed for the future, let's review how we got to where we are today.

Wastewater collection and treatment developed in the City of Albuquerque much as it did in the rest of the United States. The earliest objective was convenience and disposal; to get sewage out of the house and out of town.

The first sewers were installed in 1891 and carried sewage untreated to the Rio Grande. Having accomplished that and the public health benefit of separating people from open waste in town, the next step was reducing public health threats to those downstream.

Sewage treatment began in 1907. Its purpose was still sewage disposal, but in a manner that expanded public health protection. The theme continued through the 1960s in a series of improvements to the first sewage treatment plant at 2nd and Anderson Streets and the construction of the water reclamation plant at 2nd Street and Rio Bravo.

During this period, a great deal of dependence was placed on the ability of the river to assimilate the wastes put into it and to cleanse itself. The ability was not without limit, and as populations grew in New Mexico and the rest of the country, rivers could no longer accept the burden.

In the early 1970s, a new objective was added: environmental protection. Strict regulations were developed that went beyond protection of public health to protection of the environment. Treatment facilities were improved to meet these regulations, and the concept of disposal began to change.

The earliest efforts to recover something from Albuquerque waste rather than just throwing it away involved the use of methane gas produced by the treatment process to create heat and electricity. This concept has grown to the point that in the near future, essentially all of the waste removed will be put to beneficial reuse.

In addition to reclaiming the waste itself, water that would otherwise be discharged to the river is being recycled at the plant and used for purposes not requiring drinking water quality. In the process literally hundreds of millions of gallons of drinking water is saved. This concept will be expanded in the future to include irrigation of turf areas outside of the plant, such as parks and golf courses.

The plan will address change. Services were once limited to city residences. Today, approximately 15% of residential customers live outside of the city limits, and these connections are increasing faster than those within the city. Industrial flow is growing at about the same rate as total flow. The biggest changes are expected to come in the increasing strength of incoming wastewater as both residents and businesses conserve water and in the reuse of the wastewater after treatment.

We encourage your interest, input and participation in this planning effort. This web page will be updated periodically as new information is developed. If you would like to actively participate, let us know by emailing us with your name, address and area of interest.