

# Is Your Sewer Pipe About to Fail?

You probably don't think about your sewer until something goes wrong. Perhaps your toilet or another drain backs up, or a smelly sinkhole appears in your yard. These are signs that your sewer pipe may be clogged or broken.

Property owners are responsible for the sewer pipe (called a lateral or side sewer) that connects the plumbing of their house or building to the public sewer under the street. The Central Contra Costa Sanitary District (Central San) is responsible for the public sewers, only.



## Why Do Sewer Pipes Fail?

Nothing lasts forever, and a sewer pipe is no exception. Although modern PVC (plastic) pipes can last for 100 years, older pipes are usually made from clay, cast iron, or other material with a shorter life expectancy. If you live in a house built before the 1970s, there's a good chance the pipe is clay and will soon wear out.

The most common sewer problem is root intrusion. Hair-thin tree roots can squeeze into tiny cracks in a pipe or joint. The moisture and nutrients within the pipe enable the roots to thrive and grow until they completely clog the line; they can even cause clay pipes to break.

Sewer pipes can also get clogged by an accumulation of grease and debris (such as disposable wipes). Many other factors can cause sewer pipes to clog or break.

## How Can I Find Out if My Sewer Pipe Needs to be Repaired or Replaced?

If a toilet or household drain empties more slowly than usual, if you have a sewage backup, or if patches in your yard are always wet, have your sewer pipe inspected by a licensed plumbing contractor to see if it needs to be cleaned, repaired or replaced. A video inspection of the inside of the pipe is the best way to determine whether the pipe is damaged or simply clogged.

## How Much Will It Cost?

The cost of a pipe repair or replacement will depend on several factors (such as location, accessibility, length and depth of the pipe, cause of failure, type of material, and number of connections) and can range from a few hundred to several thousand dollars.

## What Permits Are Required?

Apart from routine cleaning and video inspection, all work done on an outside sewer pipe requires a permit from Central San before the work begins. This includes any repair, alteration, extension, or replacement of your lateral, even if you or the contractor have a building or plumbing permit from the city or county.

If the sewer work requires excavation in a public street, an encroachment permit from the city or county will also be needed.

A licensed plumbing contractor will know what permits are required. Be sure to ask before work begins.

▶ ***Do not hire a contractor who says such work can be done without a permit!***

## How Do I Hire a Contractor to Do the Work?

Most licensed plumbing contractors can repair or replace a sewer pipe; you should get estimates from at least three. It's also good to ask friends or family to recommend contractors, if possible, and interview each one to get a feel for their knowledge and competence. Be sure to ask for references, and check them.

Read the contractor's proposal carefully. While this is not an all-inclusive list, at a minimum, make sure it contains:

- ▶ a detailed description of the work to be done;
- ▶ a statement that all required permits will be obtained;
- ▶ a clear explanation of who is responsible for the cost of permits;
- ▶ a statement that the work will be completed in compliance with Central San's Standard Specifications;
- ▶ a statement that the site will be cleaned up and restored when the project is complete.

Look for payment terms, as well. While a deposit may be required before work begins, you should never pay the total balance until the job is complete. State law limits deposits to 10% of the proposed cost of the work or \$1,000, whichever is lower.

Once you have hired a contractor and the Central San permit has been obtained, our inspectors will ensure the job complies with our specifications.

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## What Repair Methods Are Available?

Sewer pipe repairs are performed using either an open-cut or trenchless method.

For open-cut repairs, hand-digging or a backhoe will create a trench to expose the damaged portion of the pipe. After the work is completed, the trench will be filled in.

Trenchless methods, such as pipe-bursting and lateral-lining, typically cause less damage (to landscaping, pavement, etc.) than open-cut repairs. With pipe-bursting, an expanding device travels through the pipe, breaks it apart, pushes the pieces out of the way, and pulls in a new pipe, all at the same time. The lateral-lining method introduces a resin-soaked fiber lining into the pipe, which hardens to form a new pipe inside the old pipe.

Be sure to ask the contractor about the alternatives available for your situation.

## What If I Have More Questions?

If you have questions about repairing or replacing your lateral, please contact Central San's Permit Staff at (925) 229-7371.

## Don't Get Cheated!

**B**e aware that there are dishonest contractors marketing sewer pipe replacements.

Some may offer to replace your sewer pipe when the city or county is repaving, or when Central San or another utility is working on your street, as "part of that project." While doing NEEDED sewer work before a paving project is often a good idea, Central San never grants exclusive marketing rights for private work to any contractor.

Others may try to pressure you into signing a contract and waiving your right to a three-day cooling off period by telling you the situation is an emergency, or that Central San will penalize you for not acting quickly. These statements are almost always untrue.

They may also tell you not to contact Central San.

Always get references and multiple estimates for any sewer repair or replacement work.

If you have questions about the need for sewer work, call Central San's Permit Staff at (925) 229-7371.

## Who to Call If You Have a Sewer Problem

**C**entral San crews maintain more than 1,500 miles of public sewer pipes. But most sewer problems happen inside the privately owned sewer pipes (called laterals) that connect the plumbing of houses and other buildings to the public sewers. Those laterals are the property owners' responsibility.

On rare occasions, a problem in the public sewer may cause sewage to backup and overflow inside a house, especially if its lateral doesn't have a properly installed Overflow Protection Device (see page 9).

It can sometimes be difficult to know whether a sewer problem is occurring in the lateral (property owner's responsibility) or the public sewer (Central San's responsibility).

The good news is that you don't NEED to know the source of the problem before calling for professional help. You have a couple of choices:



- Call Central San at (925) 933-0955 or 933-0990. A crew will respond quickly to determine whether the problem is in the public sewer or your lateral. If it's in the public sewer, they'll fix it. If it's in your lateral, they'll ask you to call a plumbing service to take care of it.

- Call the plumbing service of your choice. They will determine whether the problem is in the public sewer or your lateral. If it's in your

lateral, they'll fix it. If it's in the public sewer, they'll call Central San to come out and fix the problem. In that case, Central San will reimburse you for the response fee charged by your plumber (up to one hour's fee).

If you have any questions about sewer maintenance, call (925) 933-0955. If you have questions about fee reimbursement, call (925) 229-7320.