

## FACTS ABOUT SEWER BACKUP INCIDENTS

Sewer back-ups are an unfortunate, but common, problem in any city or town which has a public wastewater system. Although municipal utilities departments make every effort to prevent such incidents, they still occur. The following information is offered to help property owners/occupants understand why sewer back-ups happen, how to help prevent them, and what steps could be taken if a sewer backup affects your home/building.

### What causes sewer back-ups?

- Sewer overflows/back-ups can be caused by a number of factors and usually involve sewer line blockages in either the City's main sewer line or the home/building sewer service line (line between building and the City's main sewer line). In home/building sewer systems, the main causes of blockages/back-ups are the accumulation of grease, roots, hair, or solid materials such as diapers, sanitary napkins, and/or other materials that are too large for the pipes to handle. Such materials may cause major blockages/back-ups in the City's main sewer lines as well as in the home/building's sewer service lines.
- A frequent cause of blockages/back-ups within the City's wastewater system is vandalism. Leaves, sticks, rocks, bricks, trash and debris and many other items have been found in manholes and have caused major damage to the City's wastewater system. Please report observations of any such activity.

### How could a sewer back-up affect me?

- If the back-up occurs in the City's wastewater system, the sewer will normally overflow out of the lowest possible opening, which is usually a manhole or cleanout, however; in some homes/buildings, especially those with basements or where the lowest level is on the same elevation or lower than the nearest sewer manhole, the sewer could potentially overflow through the home/building's drains and toilets.

### What can I do if a sewer back-up occurs at my home/building?

- Remove the cleanout cap from your sewer service line.
- Take action to protect people and valuable property, set furniture etc up off of the floor on cans, blocks etc.
- Keeping in mind that plumbing fixtures can be fragile, quickly close all drain openings with stoppers or plugs. A string mop may be used to help plug toilet openings.
- Do not run any water down the drains until the blockage has been cleared.
- Call the Van Buren Municipal Utilities immediately at 479-474-5067 – **after normal business hours, leave your name, address, phone number, and a brief message and the on-call personnel will respond.**
- If the problem is in the home/building's sewer service line, it will be your responsibility to have it unstopped.

### If I call the VBMU, what will they do about a sewer blockage/back-up on my property?

- You will be asked questions about the blockage/back-up time of occurrence, location, etc.
- VBMU personnel will check for and clear blockages in the City's main sewer line.
- If the City's main sewer line is not blocked, you will be advised to call a plumber or sewer service to check the home/building sewer service line. Maintenance and repair of the home/building plumbing system is your responsibility.

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AFTER HOURS LEAVE YOUR NAME, PHONE NUMBER, LOCATION, AND A BRIEF  
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- To minimize damage and negative health effects, you should arrange for cleanup of the home/building as soon as possible. There are qualified businesses that specialize in this type of cleanup.

### **Is there anything I can do to prevent sewer backup into my home?**

- Avoid putting grease down your garbage disposal or household drain. It can solidify collect debris, and accumulate in City sewer lines, or build up in your own sewer system.
- Never flush disposable diapers, baby wipes, sanitary napkins, or paper towels down the toilet. They could stop up your sewer lines, damage your sewer system, and/or stop up City sewer lines.
- Make sure there is an accessible cleanout on the home/ building's sewer service line. Many times, cleanouts become hidden or buried over the years. If your home/building does not have a cleanout, one should be installed. If there is a sewer cleanout accessible, Van Buren Municipal Utilities personnel will be able to determine whether the blockage is in the home/building's sewer line or in the City's main sewer line
- Do not plant shrubs or trees near sewer lines. Roots of shrubs or trees near the building's sewer service line or the City's main sewer line can damage the lines and/or cause blockages and back-ups.
- If the lowest level of your home/building is below ground level, such as a basement, or if the elevation of the floor is at or below the elevation of the nearest sewer manhole, the home/building could potentially be affected by a sewer back-up. One way to prevent a sewer back-up into these areas is to install a "back-flow valve", also known as a "check valve", on the building's sewer service line. For further information about preventive measures, contact a licensed plumber or a plumbing supply dealer.

### **What does the City of Van Buren Municipal Utilities do to prevent this problem?**

- Every attempt is made to prevent blockages and back-ups in the public wastewater collection system before they occur. Sewer lines are designed to help prevent accumulation and blockages. In addition, we have maintenance crews that are devoted to inspecting and cleaning the public wastewater lines throughout the City on a regular schedule. Root control chemicals are also injected into City main sewer lines in areas that are prone to stoppages. Deteriorated City main sewer lines are replaced as funds become available. Even with our maintenance schedule and improvement program, sewer back-ups are often beyond the City's control. Most back-ups that occur are confined to the City's wastewater system, rather than backing up into a home/building.

### **Will my insurance cover damage to my home/building or property resulting from a sewer back-up?**

- In the majority of cases, a special rider will need to be added to your insurance policy to cover damages related to sewer back-ups or water damage. This optional coverage is usually not very expensive, but you must request that it be added to your insurance policy. It is recommended that you check with your insurance agent about this policy provision.
- Like the majority of municipalities in the country, the VBMU cannot assume financial responsibility for damages resulting from sewer back-ups. Most blockages and back-ups are related to conditions that are beyond the City's control. That is why it is extremely important that property owners and/or building occupants confirm that they are adequately insured, particularly if areas of the home/building are at a low level. Call your insurance agent to inquire about this type of coverage.

**The City of Van Buren Municipal Utilities Damage Claims Policy can be found online at [vbmunicipalutilities.org](http://vbmunicipalutilities.org).**

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