

HARBORCREEK TOWNSHIP SEWER AUTHORITY SEWER BACKUP POLICY

General Information

A sewer backup creates a stressful and emotional situation for the homeowner/ renter. In some cases it may cause health and safety concerns as well as significant property loss. A proper response to a sewer backup can greatly minimize property damage and diminish the threat of illness.

The Harborcreek Township Sewer Authority makes every effort to be responsive to a resident's needs and concerns when a sewer backup occurs. The Authority performs regular maintenance on the sewer mains, including cleaning, televising and root cutting, however, backups can still occur. Because a sewer is not a closed secured system, many things put into the sewer can clog the system. Large amounts of grease from restaurants and disposable (and cloth) diapers are two common items that cause problems. While the Authority has adopted rules prohibiting the discharge of any substance likely to cause a sewer obstruction and tries to educate the public about the problems they cause, it is a reality that these events happen and they are not always preventable. Other factors can cause backups as well, such as tree roots, which can grow into and obstruct the system.

Under Pennsylvania law, the Authority is not financially responsible for most sewer backups. It does, however, maintain liability insurance for those cases where responsibility may fall with the Authority. When requested by a property owner or tenant, the Authority will report a backup to its insurance carrier. Once the incident has been reported to the carrier, the Authority will rely on the advice of its solicitor and insurance carrier. No damages or other costs will be paid by the Authority without the approval and recommendation of the solicitor and insurance carrier.

Many homeowners' insurance policies exclude damage resulting from sewer backups. However, some insurance companies do provide sewer backup coverage. In the majority of cases, a special rider will need to be added to your homeowner's or renter's insurance policy to cover damages related to sewage backups or water damage. If you are concerned about the possibility of a sewer backup and want to insure that you are covered, the Authority urges you to check with your home insurer regarding the availability of sewer backup insurance.

Contact Information

If you experience a sewer backup problem, you should contact a plumber or drain cleaning service to determine if your problem is in your sewer lateral.

If the problem is in the sewer lateral, the homeowner or business is responsible for correcting the problem. The owner of the property is responsible for maintaining and cleaning the sewer lateral from the building (or home) to the Authority's sewer main, including the connection at the sewer main. Locating the lateral is also the responsibility of the property owner. Plumbing companies often have special locating equipment, which will be helpful.

If the problem is in the sewer lateral, whom do you call for help? You will need to call a

plumber or a sewer/drain cleaning service. The Authority does not make recommendations, however, a list of acceptable plumbers is provided on the Harborcreek Township website: ([www.harborcreektownship.org/pressrelease/sewerauth/plumbers\(.pdf\)](http://www.harborcreektownship.org/pressrelease/sewerauth/plumbers(.pdf))). It may be in your best interest to obtain several estimates. To minimize damage and negative health effects, the owner/renter should arrange for repairs of the lateral as soon as possible.

If your plumber determines that the problem is in the sewer main, please contact the Authority office at 814-899-9191. The Authority will investigate and take steps to clear the main.

Lateral vs. Main

What is a sewer lateral? A sewer lateral or house lateral is the pipeline between the Authority sanitary sewer main, usually located in the street, and the building. The sewer lateral is owned and maintained by the property owner including any part, which may extend into the street or public right of way.

More often than not, the cause of a backup in your lateral is from items that the line is not meant to handle, such as kid's toys, underwear, towels, diapers, paper products (other than toilet paper) keys, etc. Another common cause of backups are roots in your lateral. The lateral is the responsibility of the owner of the property from the house to the sewer main.

Ways to Prevent Backups in Your Lateral and in the Authority Main:

The property owner can do many things to prevent his lateral from backing up. Remember too, that the very same things can help to prevent backups in the Authority main as well. If everyone would be careful about how they dispose of certain products, our systems would be a great deal more efficient, cause fewer backups, cost us all less money, and prevent a lot of misery.

Grease: Cooking oil should be poured into a heat-resistant container and disposed of, after it cools off, in the garbage, not the drain. Some people assume that washing grease down the drain with hot water is satisfactory. This grease goes down the drain, cools off, and solidifies either in the drain, the property owner's lateral or in the main sewer. When this happens, the drain line constricts and may eventually clog.

Paper Products: Paper towels, disposable (and cloth) diapers, and feminine products cause a great deal of problems in the property owner's lateral as well as in the Authority main. These products do not deteriorate quickly, as does bathroom tissue. They may become lodged in portions of the lateral/main, causing sewer backup. These products should be disposed of in the garbage.

Roots and pipe joints: Over the years, sewer pipe has been made from various materials such as Orangeburg, vitrified clay tile or PVC (polyvinyl chloride). Orangeburg and clay tile are brittle and more prone to intrusion from roots at their joints. PVC pipe is made from long lasting, durable plastic material that uses water tight seals at every joint and is more resistant to root intrusion. Shrubs and trees, seeking moisture, will make their way into sewer line cracks and pipe joints. These roots can cause extensive damage. They may start out small, getting into a small crack in the pipe; but as the tree or shrub continues to grow, so does the root. After time, this causes your sewer line to break, which in turn allows debris to hang up in the line, thus causing a backup. One way to prevent roots from entering your line is to replace your line and tap with new plastic (PVC) pipe. The other alternative is to be careful about planting greenery around your sewer line. If you have continuing problems with tree roots in your lateral, you may have to have them cut periodically.

Sewer Odor: Another concern that property owners have is that they can smell sewer odors inside their house or building. There are many ways to prevent this from occurring. Under each sink or drain in your plumbing system is a "P-Trap". If there is water in this trap, odors or gasses from the sewer cannot enter through the drain from either the property owner's lateral or the Authority main. Periodically check to make sure that unused floor drains, sinks, etc. have water in the "PTrap". Another way to prevent sewer odor is to ensure that the vents, which are located on your roof, are free from bird's nests, leaves, etc. When these vents are clear, the sewer odors will escape through these vents.

Illegal Plumbing Connections: Do not connect French drains, sump pumps and other flood control systems to your sanitary sewer. It is illegal, and debris and silt will clog your line. Consult a plumber to correct any illegal connections.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: What is the Authority's responsibility regarding private sewer laterals?

A: The property owner is fully responsible for maintaining adequate sewage flow to and through the sewer lateral, from the property structure to and into the Authority's sewer main. When failure or stoppage of a sewer lateral occurs, the Authority crews will respond only to check the sewer main to verify that the main is open and sewage is flowing. If the sewer main is found to be clear, it is the responsibility of the property owner to call a licensed plumber or drain cleaning service to correct the problem.

Q: What if my sewer backs up?

A: If you experience a sewer backup, call a plumber or drain cleaning service. If the problem is in the lateral, it is the responsibility of the property owner to call a plumber or

sewer/drain cleaning service to correct the problem. The property owner is responsible for maintaining adequate flow to and through the sewer lateral from the property structure to and into the Authority sewer main. If the blockage is in the Authority main, the Authority will fix it as quickly as possible and keep you informed about what is being done.

Q: What about mess?

A: A sewer backup can lead to disease, destruction of your valuables, damage to your house, and electrical malfunctions. Prompt cleanup of affected property can help minimize the inconvenience and damage.

You should immediately arrange for the cleanup of your property:

Take before-and-after photos of the affected areas

Turn off electrical power to the affected area

Itemize any property losses

Wet-vacuum or remove spillage

Mop the floors and wipe walls with soap and disinfectant

Flush out and disinfect plumbing fixtures

Steam clean or remove carpet and drapes

Repair or remove wallboard or wall covering

Clean up appliances or ductwork