



# PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT PLAN

## WASTEWATER TREATMENT PLANT IMPROVEMENTS

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June 2019



**City of Stevenson Wastewater Treatment Plant Improvements  
Public Engagement Plan**

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# INTRODUCTION / SITUATION ASSESSMENT

The City of Stevenson is planning wastewater system improvements to address current and future capacity and compliance issues. The needed improvements will produce substantial costs, resulting in significant increases for customer sewer rates. Barney & Worth, Inc. (B&W) was retained by the City's consulting engineers to develop an initial approach for engaging customers and others in planning for the wastewater improvements.

This Public Engagement Plan outlines Guiding Principles, identifies key audiences and describes planned use of communication tools to educate the community about needed wastewater treatment improvements and related costs.

## GUIDING PRINCIPLES

We recommend adopting Guiding Principles to communicate the City's overall intent and approach for the wastewater system improvements. The Guiding Principles will be incorporated in communications tools outlined in this Engagement Plan (e.g., website, fact sheet, FAQs, etc.). The Guiding Principles proposed for the City's consideration appear in the following text box.

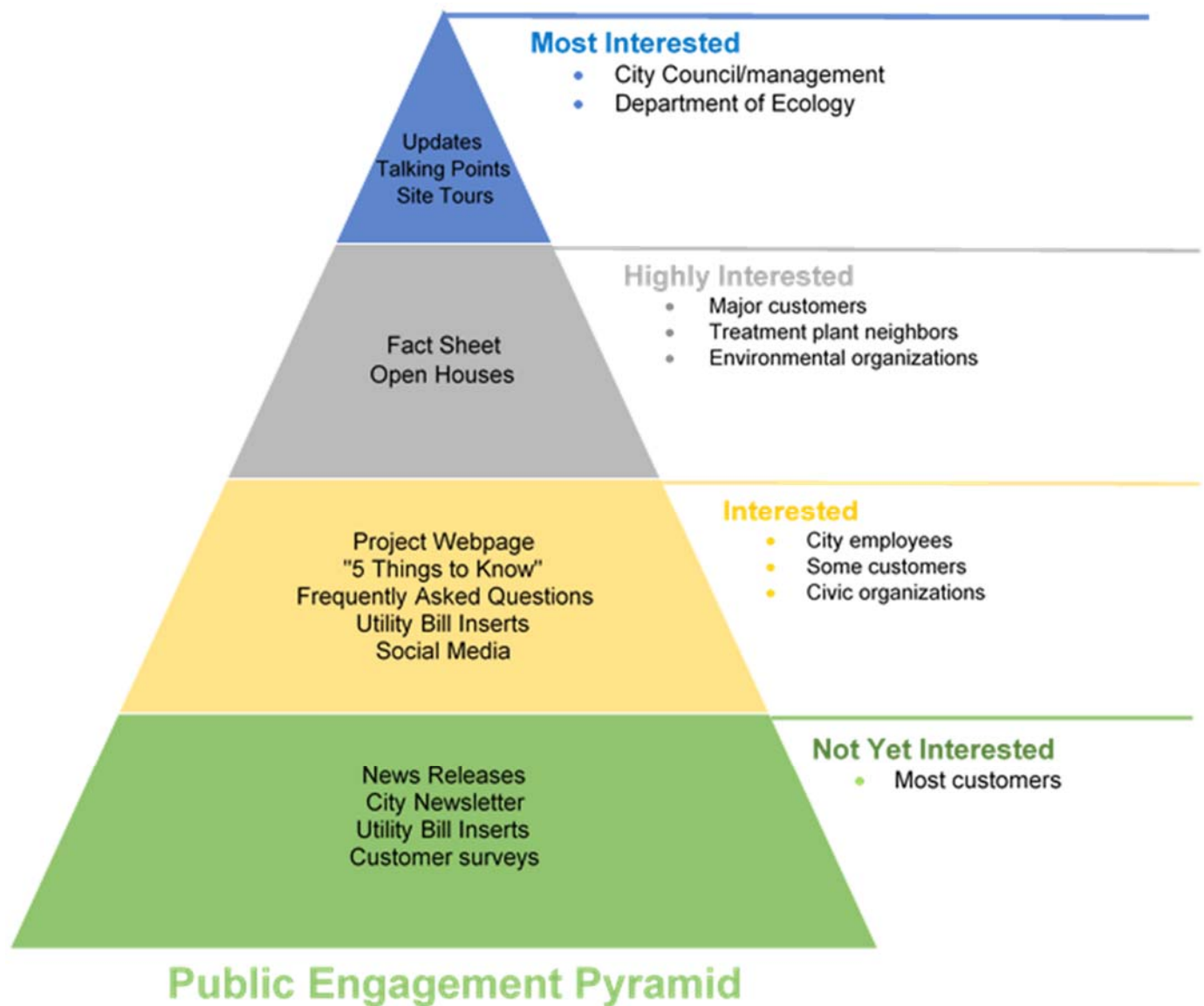
### City of Stevenson Wastewater Improvements: Guiding Principles

The City of Stevenson is committed to:

- ☒ Protecting water quality in the Columbia River consistent with water quality testing, the Clean Water Act, and Washington Administrative Rules.
- ☒ Using credible experts to develop solutions based on the best available science and engineering.
- ☒ Providing clear activities and milestones including a timetable for achieving incremental environmental benefits on the way to full regulatory compliance.
- ☒ Seeking creative technical and funding solutions, working to keep sewer service affordable for City customers.
- ☒ Being open and transparent in documenting problems and communicating the pathway to resolving capacity and compliance issues. Actively communicating Stevenson's long-term plans, steady progress and projected costs.
- ☒ Fully informing sewer utility customers, and other interested parties.

## KEY AUDIENCES

Key audiences and public education and outreach tools to reach them are shown in the diagram below. To achieve the goal of providing multiple opportunities for all categories of customers and stakeholders to engage and learn, a range of tools and methods are used. The Public Engagement Pyramid (see below) shows how different methods can be employed to engage customers and others to increase their awareness of Stevenson's wastewater collection and treatment system and needed improvements. These strategies and tools are geared to reach each customer's and stakeholder's level of interest, from the very few who are "highly interested," to the greater number of "interested" stakeholders, and even the others who are not yet informed or engaged. The function of each education/outreach tool is outlined on the next page.



## BRANDING AND MESSAGING

Clear and consistent messaging is key to effective customer communications. Information needs to be designed to anticipate and answer customers' questions: What is planned? Why? What other options were considered? When will the improvements be made? What's the cost and who pays?

Most likely, the leading issue will be affordability. A key to messaging on affordability is understanding the situation for each type of customer. The Guiding Principles commit the City to "*seeking creative technical and funding solutions, working to keep sewer services affordable for City customers.*" The City of Stevenson's sensitivity to project cost and affordability needs to be demonstrated.

Preliminary project messaging is provided on the next page, in the form of Initial Talking Points.

## Initial Talking Points

- ☑ Stevenson's wastewater treatment plant is old and needs major upgrades and expansion to comply with federal and state regulations and to meet the community's current and future needs.
- ☑ Studies show the best path forward for Stevenson is to upgrade and expand the existing wastewater treatment plant. The upgraded treatment plant will use advanced technology to produce high quality water that meets state and federal standards. The treated water will continue to be released to the Columbia River.
- ☑ Our sewer pipes are also old and leaking, allowing clean rain and groundwater to get into the sewer system and further increasing flows to the wastewater treatment plant.
- ☑ Repairing leaks in the sewer system and continuing to use the existing wastewater treatment plant will make the most of our past investments.
- ☑ Preliminary estimates show costs for the needed wastewater system improvements could be up to \$16 Million. This is a major undertaking for our community, but the time to address this challenge is now.
- ☑ We want to make these improvements as affordable as possible, including working with our state and federal representatives to set realistic deadlines and to secure state/federal funding. However, customers' monthly sewer rates are expected to rise significantly to help support the project. Development fees will also increase to ensure that new development pays its fair share. A study is underway to determine the appropriate amount to be paid by each customer category – residential, commercial, industrial – based on their contributions to wastewater volume and strength.
- ☑ The City of Stevenson is committed to keeping customers informed about plans for wastewater system improvements, protecting water quality in local streams and rivers, and keeping costs as low as possible for sewer customers.
- ☑ More information is available on the City's project website at <http://ci.stevenson.wa.us/cleanwater/>.

## ENGAGEMENT TOOLS

### Talking Points

Preliminary talking points are shown in the text box below. These will be vetted with the City Council, then updated and replaced at key project milestones.

### City Council Updates

The City's elected leaders need to be kept informed so they are prepared to respond accurately to questions from the public. The City Council will be kept up-to-date on Stevenson's path to attaining adequate treatment capacity and regulatory compliance, highlighting the "bright line" goals that will demonstrate consistent progress and reinforce the City's commitment to resolving capacity and compliance issues and preparing for the future. New Council members will be oriented as needed. Presentations and updates provided by City management and consulting engineers will prepare City Council members to serve as "ambassadors" on this issue in the community.

## Site Tours

Staff will conduct tours of key sites for City Council members: existing treatment plant, current discharge points, other wastewater system elements needing improvement, and peer facilities.

## “5 Things to Know” and Frequently Asked Questions

Initial information will be developed outlining “*5 Things to Know*” about the wastewater system improvements. This will be supplemented by answers to “frequently asked questions”. Once finalized, this information will be posted on the project webpage and can also be provided to the City Council, distributed to interested stakeholders, excerpted for other communications, and provided to the public at City Council and other public meetings. Information will be updated at key program milestones (e.g., availability of new information on the problems and possible solutions, reaching a program milestone). The “5 Things to Know” will be turned into a project poster, available at City Hall, and displayed in other public places.

## Project Webpage

The City currently has a dedicated webpage on the City of Stevenson’s website. We recommend additions and improvements over time to supplement and help tie together the information on the wastewater system improvements and provide an accessible introduction for newly interested customers and members of the public.

Recommended content will ultimately include:

- Brief background/overview (from the fact sheet)
- Guiding Principles
- Economic development
- Environmental compliance documents
- City’s commitment and approach to compliance
- Protecting water quality
- The imperative to remove fats-oils-grease (FOG)
- Maintaining affordability for City customers; current and proposed rates and charges
- Rate information for various customer categories
- Low income assistance
- Vicinity maps/infographic showing planned improvements/timeline
- Photo album: existing treatment plant, I/I improvements, receiving stream at outfall location
- News articles/news releases

## **Fact Sheets**

Develop a basic project fact sheet, then update it as needed. Supplemental information available on the website can provide more in-depth technical information for those audiences most interested in the project (examples of topics are Stevenson’s ratesetting methodology, the problem with FOG, conditions in the receiving stream, treatment technology, permit limits).

## **Social Media**

The City currently communicates using the Chamber of Commerce Facebook page. In the future, the City needs to establish it’s own unique Social Media presence to communicate with residents, customers and other interested parties.

## **Utility Bill Insert/City Newsletter**

The City currently produces/distributes utility bills as a postcard – not suitable for public education on more complex topics. The City will soon be establishing a biennial newsletter publication to reach every home and business to cover the wastewater treatment improvements and possibly a multitude of other topics.

## **News Releases and Letters to the Editor**

Stevenson’s planned wastewater system improvements haven’t yet received media coverage. News releases should be prepared to coincide with program milestones, and would be officially released by City staff. The project team will work with staff to identify promising topics and timing for news releases and develop complementary information on the City website.

The *Skamania County Pioneer* includes an editorial section and has published letters to the editor supplied by City staff to increase project awareness. We recommend continuing this approach with periodic letters to the editor or “In My View” opinion pieces.

## **Open Houses**

Public open houses can be held at key decision points to ensure customers and others have a chance to learn more and weigh-in. Open houses seldom attract broad audiences, so they must be supplemented by other engagement methods. One option is to hold open houses in conjunction with other community events happening in Stevenson, or host a family-friendly summer event in a park.

## **Community Events and Organizations**

The City will continue their current outreach method of “tabling” at community events. This approach provides an opportunity to increase awareness of the project – potential events in Stevenson include the numerous community events held at the Skamania County fairgrounds. City staff can also volunteer to present to local community groups.

## **Good Neighbor Process**

The activities listed above are all designed to engage ratepayers. Separate, targeted engagement should be aimed at the “neighbors” of the treatment plant (County, Port, other property owners, business operators/tenants, others) to ensure their questions are answered and any issues addressed.

They can be invited to become involved in the planning and design of the upgraded/expanded facilities. It may not be necessary to start a good neighbor process, but it is not too early to start building relationships, reaching out to treatment plant neighbors one-on-one.

## PRELIMINARY SCHEDULE AND ASSIGNMENTS

The proposed schedule aligns public engagement activities according to anticipated project milestones. Additional milestones will be included as the project schedule evolves.

Date	Milestone/Activity	Assignments
<b>Q2-Q3 2019</b>	<b>Establish Communications Infrastructure</b>	
June	Project messaging and talking points	B&W will draft (in PEP), City to review and sit down with Council to discuss
June/July	Fact sheet	B&W and Wallis will draft, City to review
June/July	5 Things to Know and FAQs	B&W and Wallis will draft, City to review
June/July	Revamp project website	B&W and Wallis will draft suggested changes, City to review and implement on website
August	Utility bill insert to announce the new webpage and the project's progress	B&W and Wallis will draft, City to review, publish, and distribute
June 21- 22, July 25-28, August 14-17	Tabling at community events in summer events (i.e. Gorge Blues & Brews, Columbia Gorge Bluegrass Festival, Skamania County Fair & Timber Carnival)	
June through August	Social media posts for revamped webpage, tabling events	City to post
September	Project presentation to Council: closing out the immediate improvements work, show draft site layout	City to lead presentation, Wallis to provide presentation materials and attend Council session
<b>Q4 2019</b>	<b>Increase Project Visibility</b>	
October	Letter to the Editor	City and Wallis work together to draft, City publish
December	Utility bill insert	Wallis will draft, City to review, publish, and distribute
	City newsletter or mailer	
November	Site tours for City Councilors	City to lead, Wallis to attend as needed.
October 23-24, November 29 – December 1	Tabling at community events (i.e. Pumpkin Patch, Christmas in the Gorge Bazaar)	City to manage, Wallis to provide graphics as needed



<b>Date</b>	<b>Milestone/Activity</b>	<b>Assignments</b>
October-December	Social media posts advertising presence at community events	City to lead
	Open house for treatment plant neighbors	
<b>Q1 2020 and beyond</b>	<b>Continue Periodic Communications</b>	
January	Talking points – update as needed	Wallis will draft, City to review
Quarterly	Quarterly articles in the utility bill insert/City newsletter	Wallis will draft, City to review, publish, and distribute
	Website – update as needed	
	News release	
	Social media posts – at key milestones and advertising community events	
	Open House prior to construction to inform public on construction plans, mitigation and schedule, impact.	

### **Responsibilities/General Roles:**

#### City of Stevenson

- Implementation of PEP assignments

#### Wallis Engineering

- Manage implementation of PEP assignments
- Technical content and graphics

#### Barney & Worth, Inc.

- Draft and finalize PEP
- Contingency - detailed input and support of implementing PEP assignments