

Pride flows after more than century of service

Sewage is one of those topics most of us don't often think about. Not even when we flush.

The North Shore Water Reclamation District has been on the job treating our wastewater, and protecting Lake Michigan and area waterways, since 1914 when 36,000 households in six communities began having their sewage treated.

The NSWRD is one of those quasi-governmental agencies that does its business with a mainly stellar record and little fanfare, cleaning 50 million gallons of sewage daily. It's a messy job, but somebody's got to do it.

Headquartered in Gurnee, it is the second-largest water reclamation district in Illinois behind only the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District which serves Chicago and Cook County. It also is one of the least-taxing taxing bodies listed on your annual property tax bills. The district's fiscal year 2025 budget adopted earlier this year is holding user fees, based on water consumption, flat for the fifth consecutive year.

More than 300,000 residents of mainly eastern Lake County in 17 communities — Bannockburn, Beach Park, Deerfield, Fort Sheridan, Grayslake, Green Oaks, Gurnee, Highland Park, Highwood, Lake Bluff, Lake Forest, Naval Station Great Lakes, North Chicago, Park City, Waukegan, Winthrop Harbor and Zion — are served by the district's three regional treatment facilities in Gurnee at O'Plaine Road and Washington Street, Highland Park off Clavey Road and Waukegan, off Pershing Road on the city's lakefront.

Without sewage treatment facilities, growth can come to a standstill. That's what happened in eastern Lake County in the mid-1970s.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency forced the then-North Shore Sanitary District to upgrade its facilities and stop dumping mostly raw sewage into Lake Michigan — the main source of drinking water for much of the

county. It was a common occurrence, mainly from the Waukegan treatment facility.

Cited numerous times with violations of the U.S. Clean Water Act of 1972, the sanitary district, renamed the North Shore Water Reclamation District in 2014, used millions of dollars in state and federal funding grants and cleaned up its polluting act.

Vast investments in new water treatment facilities, installing new interceptor sewer lines and building more pumping stations to move wastewater away from Lake Michigan were undertaken. Treated wastewater is now discharged into the Des Plaines River and the East Fork of the North Branch of the Chicago River.

NSWRD officials claim the treated effluent often is cleaner than what normally flows in the two streams. Indeed, a recent study commissioned by the Des Plaines River Watershed Workgroup determined that from 20 sites measured, the water discharged by district facilities benefits fish and other aquatic life in the river. Especially in locations just downstream from outflow points, officials reported.

Treating human waste and water from toilets, baths, showers, dishwashers and industrial concerns, is a combination of biological and chemical processes which are kept in balance at treatment plants. For the uninitiated, sewage is wastewater; sewerage is water that enters drainage systems.

According to the U.S. EPA, the average American produces 100 gallons of wastewater daily. All of that ends up at a treatment facility.

The district's three treatment plants have been recognized for excellence by the National Association of Clean Water Agencies. Most recently, the district's Ward 4 Trustee Tom Swarthout, a former Lake Forest alderman, was honored with the Illinois Association of Wastewater Agencies Public Officials Award for public service. Republican Swarthout was reelected to another four-year term in the Nov. 5 election, defeating Gerald Imperial of Gurnee by a 7,974 to 6,835 margin, 53.8% to 46.1%.

Swarthout, on the NSWRD board since 2012, pushed for construction of the million-gallon sewage storage basin at Lake Bluff's Sunrise Beach — which is designed to protect Lake Michigan from sewage overflows when system capacity is exceeded — when ComEd power is lost or when maintenance is needed. The project was first proposed 20 years ago.

The NSWRD also is involved in something not usually tied to the treatment of sewage. The district recently partnered with the Park District of Highland Park

and the Art Center of Highland Park at the city's Moraine Beach, at 2501 Sheridan Road.

Rectangular manhole structures near the 13-acre park are now disguised as colorful Op Art cubes as part of a public art project.

You can think of their artistic value when you flush.

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