

The Canadian Engineer

A weekly paper for Canadian civil engineers and contractors

Are Sewers Remunerative to Small Municipalities?

Analysis of the Costs and the Benefits—It Pays to Construct Sewerage Systems Even in Very Small Towns, Claims Paper Read at the Hamilton Convention of Medical Officers of Health

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SMALL towns in Ontario are, almost without exception, provided with waterworks systems, originally designed for fire protection, but to-day, through progressive development, available as water supplies and, indeed, generally used as such.

The characteristic persistence of rural tradition in the small towns of Ontario has, however, retarded the complete acceptance of this new convenience, and according to available figures, only from 80 to 90 per cent. of the population are connected to such systems. Wells continue to be used by the remainder, some wells persisting even in very congested districts; especially is this true if the water supply of the town is subject to suspicion. Local officers of health are, however, rapidly dealing with the situation and are effecting improvements through two measures, in both of which they have the full co-operation of the Provincial Board of Health. The first is the protection of municipal water supplies and their purification, borne if necessary by general rates. Second, the abolishing and closure of all wells within the area where urban conditions may be said to exist.

These measures, when properly carried out, invariably put the waterworks on a paying basis, eradicate water-borne disease and introduce relatively large amounts of water into the home which must later be disposed of. It is to the disposal of wastes that this paper directs attention.

The Way to Avoid Complaints

It is not within the province of this paper to dwell at length on the various methods available for the disposal of wastes, or to describe minutely the odors and stenches occasioned by the improper discharge of slops and filth from sanitary conveniences. Neither is it necessary to remind this audience of the complaints so commonly arising from the pollution of wells by cesspools and septic tank systems; complaints, by the way, only too frequently founded on fact. Nor is it required to touch the troublesome conscience that wakes up every time a medical officer of health gives countenance to the use of some artifice which, whilst removing some local nuisance, directly contravenes the Public Health Act which he has been appointed to uphold. It is enough for me to state that the proper way of protecting a town and of avoiding many causes of complaint is to induce the municipality to adopt a sewerage system.

This step is recommended, not solely for the sanitary improvement bound to accompany it, but in addition, for the economic advantages which are as truly evidenced in the inducement it offers to manufacturers to locate in

such towns, as well as the actual saving in cost and ease of payment compared with other methods of sewage disposal.

The greatest obstacles to the improved sanitation of the small town are its rural tradition and the opposition of wealthy and established citizens whose tax rates are liable, from the peculiar nature of their holdings, to be disproportionately affected by local improvement rates.

Obstacles Fast Disappearing

The first of these obstacles is very fast disappearing, owing largely to the splendid organizing ability of our women. We have to thank also the excellence of the propaganda work of the extension services of the agricultural colleges and the women's institutes, and in no little measure the everlasting effort of the local medical officer of health.

The second obstacle is more difficult to handle, but can readily be counterbalanced by publicity, and as a final resort the mandatory powers of the provincial Board of Health may be evolved. My own experience is that almost invariably when a systematic effort is made to ensure the passing of a public health measure involving a money vote, the citizens respond with substantial majorities.

There is one other obstacle which is worth mentioning. I have reference to old property held in downtown districts for which the taxes far exceed the rental values. To properly appreciate the difficulties of effecting improvement of such property, one must look to the experience of the larger cities. There one meets but one answer, "coercion." In order to meet the distress that arises in some instances through requiring the installation of sanitary conveniences, the Public Health Act provides that a local board of health in any city may direct that the cost, including interest at 6 per cent. on the deferred payments, be paid by the owner in equal successive annual payments extending over a period not exceeding five years, and that such annual payments be added by the clerk of the municipality to the collectors' rolls and collected in like manner as municipal taxes. The installation in such cases is directed by the city.

Engineers to-day should not attempt to lay out new towns for industrial purposes without providing sewers and water mains. This is true also in the temporary military encampments. The more obvious reasons are:—

The skilled and essential portion of the industrial class is accustomed to city dwelling and both expects and demands the convenience of a water supply in the house.