

# TOWNSHIP OF CHIPPEWA

19171 4<sup>TH</sup> STREET  
PO BOX 26  
CHIPPEWA LAKE, MICHIGAN 49320-0026  
Phone: (231)867-3777

*Bryan Roels, Supervisor*

*Annette Walters, Trustee*

*Kristin K. Lytle, Clerk*

*Debra Zielinski, Trustee*

*Julie L. Austin, Treasurer*

## Topic: Avoid a fine, don't flush the wipes!

January 18, 2024

There is a growing issue in the Chippewa Lake Sewer System, the problem is with a category of products referred to as wipes. Wipes come in many different versions such as baby wipes, sanitizing wipes, antiseptic wipes, adult wipes, etc. including so called "flushable wipes". The problem is that they can cause serious and expensive problems when they are flushed down the toilet. Unlike toilet paper and human waste, **which are the only things that should be flushed down the toilet**, wipes do not decompose or only partially decompose causing problems with sewer systems including the Chippewa Lake Sewer System.

With constant or even intermediate use, wipes can form a thick and hard "crust" in the sewer tank that can render the system unusable. This "crust" can get so thick and hard that it requires the use of crowbars and shovels to break it up so that it can be removed. It doesn't stop there, since the wipes don't breakdown they can't be disposed of in the traditional way, they have to be taken to a special waste facility in Isabella County for grinding and disposal.

Along with wipes there are other products that cause similar problems such as tampons, condoms, band aids, cigarette butts, unused medications, paper towels and underwear all of which cause issues (we've seen them all). Disposal of these non-decomposed materials is very expensive, currently it costs Chippewa \$650.00 plus trucking costs to bring a loaded truck to this facility.

Chippewa Lake Sewer District annual fees are not able to absorb the additional costs to pay for the special handling of these items and as a result the Chippewa Township Board discussed and voted to charge households where we find the offending materials an additional fee of \$250.00 for first occurrence and costs of removal, dumping cost and administration fees for reoccurring offenses. Each pumping occurrence where we find wipes and other previously mentioned materials in the sewer tank as a result of a service call or during normal tank cleaning service which normally occurs every 5 years. This way only the households that continue to flush wipes will be paying the costs for special disposal.

### ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

#### **The wipes I use state right on the packaging that they are flushable, why can't I flush them?**

Many wipes do claim to be flushable and they will flush down the toilet. The problem is what happens to them once they leave the toilet bowl. Toilet paper which is specifically designed for the purpose, begins to breakdown before it even leaves the toilet. Wipes however are made from many different materials including synthetic materials including plastics and are much denser and don't breakdown. You can see this for yourself by taking a square of unused toilet paper and place it under the faucet, it will immediately begin to breakdown, in contrast a wipe under the faucet retains all or much of its shape and does not breakdown. In the sewer tank wipes just float to the top and form a hard crusty layer. Even ones that partially breakdown can cause fatbergs. Fatbergs are partially decomposed materials that clump together with oil and grease which also clog sewer systems.

#### **Is this a unique problem with the Chippewa Sewer District System?**

No, all you have to do is take a quick internet or You Tube search for Flushable Wipes and you will find many posts regarding issues caused by flushable wipes in home plumbing, private septic tank systems and public sewer systems. In fact, there is at least one nationwide class action suit against manufacturers of flushable wipes due to the damage they cause in wastewater treatment plants in major cities. New York City alone spends millions of dollars a year addressing issues with wipes in their wastewater treatment system where the problem is so severe the clumps of disposed wipes actually destroy enormous pumping equipment. Chippewa Township works hard to keep costs down but cannot afford to absorb unnecessary and avoidable costs for special handling of wipes. As a result, the Township Board voted to charge households for the special handling of the wipes and other materials such as tampons, condoms and paper towels. **Remember, only toilet paper and human waste should ever be flushed down the toilet.**

**Why not just raise the annual sewer assessment cost to everyone on the system?**

Raising the assessment to everyone is an option but the Board felt that punishing everyone for an issue that a relatively small percentage of users create isn't fair. By creating a fine that covers the cost of the special disposal and charging only those that cause the problem is the fairer option to the tax payers even though it creates more work for the Township.

**How does the Chippewa Sewer District System work?**

The Chippewa Sewer District System which was put into operation in the 1980's works on a fairly simple premise. The sewer waste from each household runs into a partitioned tank located on the same property. The raw sewage drains into the first section of the partitioned tank and sinks to the bottom where microbe's breakdown the sewage into effluent water.

A pipe that connects the first and second tank sections is located partially up the partition in the tank and allows the effluent water to drain from the first section into the second where a pump is located. The pump then moves the effluent water into the pressurized network of pipes that is routed around the lake. Three pump stations are positioned at strategic locations in the system to keep pressure on the effluent water moving until it reaches a large drain field west of Bullhead Dr. The drain field is monitored weekly by the Sewer Operator and is inspected on a regular basis by the State of Michigan Environmental Great Lakes and Energy (EGLE).

In a normal household, solids that do not breakdown must be pumped out to allow the system to keep the system healthy and working properly. The Chippewa Sewer District pumps every tank once every 5 years on a rotational basis. The solids that are removed are brought to a state approved site where it is plowed into the earth where it will further decompose. The exception are the materials that don't breakdown such as wipes, tampons, diapers, condoms, etc. These materials must be brought to a special site that has specific equipment to properly handle it at a much higher cost.

If you have any questions, please contact [bryan@chippewatwp.org](mailto:bryan@chippewatwp.org) or at 231-867-3777.