



City of Phoenix
WATER SERVICES DEPARTMENT

Q&A

Sewer Cleaning

(Grease, Roots, Manholes)

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1. Does the city of Phoenix routinely clean its sewers?

Yes. The city of Phoenix is very proactive in maintaining obstruction free sewer lines throughout our nearly 4,800 miles of sewer lines. Our preventive maintenance program reduces the potential for sewer overflows and backups that can cause serious damage and cost many dollars to repair.

2. How many of the nearly 5,000 miles does the city clean every year?

About 30 to 35 percent, or more than 1,500 miles of the city's sewer lines, are cleaned each year.

3. How do you know which section of the sewer line to clean?

Before sewer lines are cleaned, a sewer TV crew goes out and inspects sewer lines with a remote camera to look for obstructions and evaluate the integrity of the line, and based on their evaluation, a cleaning crew may be called to remove obstructions or perform basic cleaning.

4. What is the biggest problem with sewer lines which requires them to be cleaned?

The biggest problem is coagulated grease and cooking oil. This occurs because sewer customers' pour warm cooking oil or grease down their drains because they think it is a fluid that will travel through the sewer system without issue. However, the cooking oil and grease will cool as it enters the sewer line and it will coagulate, causing a blockage, in much the same way cholesterol blocks arteries in humans.

5. What should a person do with the grease or cooking oil if they can't dispose of it down the drain?

Allow the grease or cooking oil to cool in the cookware that was used, then scrape it into the trash can.

6. What happens if the grease caused obstruction isn't removed from the sewer line?

If an obstruction of any kind is allowed to continue, then a sewer overflow or backup will occur, causing damage to homes and businesses, as well as significant expenditures.

7. What other types of obstructions are there in the city's sewer lines?

The second biggest problem is roots from trees and invasive shrubs, such as oleanders. Because the roots of plants naturally seek out water sources, the roots can find their way through the pipe joints or other openings and form a root ball once inside the pipe, creating an obstruction.

8. How are sewer lines cleaned?

There are several methods. One method is to use what is known as a jet hydro-vac truck, which essentially is a pressure washer with a large vacuum that can be inserted through a sewer manhole to dislodge and remove excess sewage and some easily accessible obstructions. Another method is a rotating saw that can remove the roots inside the pipe where they enter. This can be performed in conjunction with using a TV camera so the sewer worker can see what they are doing inside the line under the street.

9. Are sewer manholes the only way to access a sewer?

Manholes are the primary method of accessing sewer lines. However, another method of accessing sewer lines is through a city owned cleanout typically found at the beginning of a sewer line within the public right of way or dedicated easement. Residential homes and businesses also are built with cleanouts as well. However, these cleanouts are generally located on private property and fall outside the jurisdiction of city staff.

10. Are manholes always located in the street?

Manholes are not always located in the street or other public right-of-way. Sometimes manholes are located in former alleyways, but because of a change in the property line, those manholes may be located on the physical property of a home, such as in someone's backyard but, within a dedicated easement.

11. How does the city access manholes that are in someone's backyard?

City employees will only access city sewer infrastructure after permission has been granted by the home owner. The only exception to this practice would be in the case of an extreme emergency where staff could not communicate with the homeowner. In these cases, law enforcement or a neighbor would be notified of the urgent need and to witness the entry and actions.

12. How can a home owner help to prevent root obstructions in the sewer line?

Strategic landscaping is the key. Care should be taken to not plant a tree or large shrub too near your property line, over or near the sewer line or cleanout for your home, or close enough to your home where the foundation can be invaded by the roots.

13. Does the city perform inspections of sewer lines for homes and businesses?

No, we are only responsible for city owned infrastructure which are portions of the system that reside in dedicated right of ways and or utility easements. Everything from the connection to that system or point, back to the house or business is responsibility of the home or business owner. A plumber should be contacted for home plumbing inspections.

14. Who should I call if I believe the city sewer is causing an overflow situation?

Please call the City of Phoenix Water Services Department at 602-262-6691, during normal business hours (Monday through Friday 6 a.m. to 3 p.m., except holidays), or call 602-261-8000, after normal hours or on weekends.