

Hudson's Corner: Lifting the FOG and getting to the root of Roland Park sewer issues

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Sewers are key to the infrastructure of this aging city and the aging north Baltimore neighborhoods. Taking care of them is important, which is why members of the engineering department of the Baltimore City Bureau of Water and Waste Water came to the Roland Park Civic League meeting Feb. 4 to give a presentation at the league's request.

I learned that FOG is a big problem with city sewers. FOG stands for fat, oil and grease, which harden and block the flow of sewage. Areas with large institutions, food-processing plants and many restaurants have lots of FOG. We have an area in Roland Park that has showed up on the engineering department's map as a FOG hotspot. Its exact location will be communicated to the civic league soon.

In addition to fat, oil and grease, the refuse from garbage disposals causes a problem in sewers, particularly six-inch sewers like those in most of Roland Park. Sparingly, if at all, is how residents were told to use disposals. Another no-brainer for maintenance of aging sewers is not flushing diapers, feminine products, thick tissues and heavy-gauge toilet paper.

A major issue for aging sewer lines is tree roots. In older areas, sewers are made of joined, two-foot sections of clay pipe. Trees love these pipes, where many joints and the slightest crack provide moisture and fertilization.

With joints every few feet, there is plenty of opportunity for roots to invade and clog the line. The more roots are pruned by blades (snaked through sewers by city maintenance crews and plumbers), the more vigorous they become. This causes recurring root problems.

A new method of maintenance the city uses is a chemical that causes dieback of roots without harm to trees. Trees are what make much of north Baltimore so beautiful, yet their roots block the flow of sewage.

Something called Root-Ex is available for homeowners to clear roots from private sewer lines leading out to the public lines.

In 2008 the city poured an industrial chemical in many manholes in Roland Park. In some areas, according to residents at the Civic League meeting, the chemical has worked; fewer back-ups have occurred. In others, the problem of back-ups on city-owned portions of sewers continues to damage residences.

At our house, which my family has owned since 1959, our sewer was attached in 1922 to a public line that had to be extended to reach our house. Several generations of public works crews have told us that the tilt of the public line is not correct and the slightest back-up farther up the line rolls back to our house.

Because of this we have had many sewage back-ups over the years. We now take the hyper-vigilant approach of having our line snaked out once or twice a year as a preventative measure. My husband checks the basement bathtub almost daily to be sure nothing is happening.

The engineers who came to the Civic League meeting recommended calling 311 for every sewage issue, so that problem areas can be documented. We do that, and the city has used the chemical in our manhole.

What I hope is that the maintenance division and the city legal department also have access to the engineers' studies and 311 calls, so a maintenance plan can begin, and homeowners can be reimbursed for damage caused by back-ups in the public line.

The unsexy problems of sewage take a coordinated effort to correct.

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