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Let's put the water where it belongs

Most homes with a basement built within the last 50 years also have a sump pump. A simple device, it takes any water that might find itself creeping down the foundation wall or under the basement floor and pumps it out of the house to where it should harmlessly run off. But the “where” it runs off isn't always so harmless.

Some homes, for one reason or another, have sump pumps that discharge to the sanitary sewer. This system is specifically designed to handle waste water and sewage and leads directly to the city's waste treatment plant.

The water from a sump pump, however, is usually ground water or rainwater and needs no treatment at all. Let it run back into a stream and the water cycle that we all learned about in the 5th grade continues as it should. When that harmless water is sent to the treatment plant, however, it uses piping, pumping and treatment capacity that should be used for sewage. Add a heavy rainfall and the sanitary sewer lines can be easily overloaded resulting in raw sewage being dumped directly into the streams and rivers.



The City of Cedar Falls (IA) proactively focused on getting clean water out by repairing sewers and recently, completed a sump pump inspection program of homes in the city built after 1969. A robust communication and education program by City staff informed residents about the inspections. Cooperation levels, as WHKS inspectors knocked on individual doors, were wonderfully high. In most cases of non-compliance, the homeowner was unaware of the problem and happy to make the simple fix.

How simple? A few bucks for a piece of PVC pipe from the home improvement store versus millions of dollars to needlessly expand the waste treatment plant.

The volume of ‘clear’ water being pumped into sanitary sewer systems is an issue facing many small towns with a huge impact on the cost of piping, pumping and treatment. An inspection program like that in Cedar Falls is one of the best “bangs for the buck” in which any city can possibly invest.

