



Candice S. Miller

Public Works Commissioner
Macomb County

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Contacts:

Norb Franz, Macomb County Public Works Office Communications Manager

586-201-5732 norb.franz@macombgov.org

Trisha Bruzek, Oakland County Water Resources Commission Marketing & Communications Supervisor

248-494-6826 bruzekp@oakgov.com

Use of damaging wipes appears to be increasing

Wipes wreaking havoc on sewer pipes, pump stations

The use of disposable wipes appears to be increasing during the pandemic, leading to costly damage to sewer pipes and pump stations serving Macomb and Oakland counties.

Labeling on packages indicates wipes are disposable, and some packages claim wipes are flushable and biodegradable. However, Macomb County Public Works Commissioner Candice S. Miller and Oakland County Water Resources Commissioner Jim Nash are emphasizing that wipes should never be flushed.

“In early 2018, approximately 70 tons of debris that had accumulated over a period of three years was removed from the Northeast Sewage Pumping Station in Detroit. Three years later, a crew that recently completed a cleaning removed approximately 270 tons of debris,” Miller said. “That’s a huge – and troubling -- increase.

“It’s unfortunate that people continue to flush these wipes. It is causing more problems and more expense for every sewer system,” Miller said. “Throw them in the garbage after use. Do not flush them down the toilet.”

“Wipes form clumps that grow into hard masses creating blockages in sewer pipes,” said Nash. “They are not safe for the sewer system and should not be flushed down the toilet. We are seeing an uptick of issues specifically at the Oakland-Macomb Interceptor sewer system and pumping station. It is taking crews longer than expected to clean the systems due to the build-up of ‘flushable’ wipes. The cost of cleaning the wipes is costly to the system and its rate-payers.”

With many people working from home for more than half of last year and into 2021, and most school-children attending classes virtually from home, heavy use of the wipes increased.

The Northeast Sewage Pumping Station, located on State Fair near Outer Drive, handles sanitary sewage from a total of 23 communities in Macomb and Oakland counties that comprise the Oakland-Macomb Interceptor Drainage District. Crews that cleaned the massive bar screens that snag most of the debris before it reaches the pumps will now begin removing the wipes twice a year. However, some wipes get through, wreaking havoc on pumps and other parts of the mechanical handling of flushed wastewater.

To the northeast, an average of approximately 1,000 pounds of wipes a week was flushed down toilets prior to the COVID-19 pandemic before reaching the Clintondale Pumping Station in Clinton Township. A couple of months after COVID-19 resulted in stay-home orders 12 months ago, that average jumped to about 4,000 pounds a week.

From spring 2018 to spring 2020, Miller's department spent approximately \$100,000 to remove two large masses of wipes from the sewer system. In 2018, a 19-ton mass of wipes and accumulated grease that attached to the sewer system was removed. The gloppy mass was dubbed the Macomb County "Fatberg" and was displayed at the Michigan Science Center in Detroit. In 2019, workers removed a 1-ton mass of wipes that became known as the "Ragball." It was composed of thousands of wipes that became knotted together in a different section of sewer.

Miller said the problem is a global one. In the United States, it could collectively cost municipalities hundreds of millions of dollars in costs to deal with the wipes, she said.

For years, Miller has encouraged people to stop flushing disposable wipes because they clog sewer systems, damage the pumps, make pump stations less efficient and can cause sewage backups. She has emphasized that wipes are not biodegradable as some manufacturers claim.

"They don't break down like toilet paper," Miller added.

Meantime, the Great Lakes Water Authority recently received a National Association of Clean Water Agencies (NACWA) 2021 National Environment Achievement Award in the Public Information and Education category for its video, "Flushables." The video can be viewed at www.youtube.com/watch?v=5u-KGEH75_E. The video is a regional collaboration between GLWA, the Macomb County Public Works Office and the Oakland County Water Resources Commission.

Photos:

A crew painstakingly clears wipes and other debris at the bottom of the giant bar screen at the Northeast Sewage Pumping Station in Detroit. The overall effort including the cleaning of the wet well took more than six weeks at an estimated cost of \$450,000 – nearly double the anticipated time and cost, primarily due to the wipe buildup.

Globs of disposable wipes and other debris raked from higher sections of the giant bar screen at the Northeast Sewage Pumping Station.

The view from the top during the cleaning of the bar screen that snags some – but not all – of the sanitary waste that flows into the Northeast Sewage Pumping Station.



ADDRESS: 21777 Dunham Road, Clinton Township, Michigan 48036 • Phone: 586-469-5325 • Fax: 586-469-5933
ENGINEERING • Phone: 586-469-5910 • Fax: 586-469-7693 ♦ **SOIL EROSION** • Phone: 586-469-5327 • Fax 586-307-8264

