

THE STATE OF THE PIPES

The city of Columbia's aging water system has 2,200 miles of pipes and 135,000 customers. Its sewer system, with its 1,200 miles of pipe and 70,000 customers, is also under stress.

FOR WATER PIPES, AGE IS A BAD THING



66 percent

Percentage of water pipes in Columbia's water system that are more than 50 years old

Age matters, because old pipes are under stress. City workers have to repair a water main leak about once a week.

It is a rare week or two where one does not break, according to John Dooley, Columbia's public utilities director since 1991.

That kind of breakage is not uncommon. Cities across the country are having the same problem. And they can be disruptive as repair crews try to fix the problems as quickly as possible while households or businesses go without water.

The city can't just fix the stuff that's broken, Dooley said recently. More extensive rehab work has got to be part of the city's budget every year. The last 10 to 12 years is when the city started doing its first serious rehab projects, Dooley said.

50 percent

Percentage of Columbia's breaks that cause service outages

104 years

How long, in the modern era of water treatment, the city has been in the business

1906

The year the Columbia Canal water treatment plant went on line. It was a 6 million-gallon-a-day plant then. It's up to 85 million gallons a day now.

95 years

The age of downtown's oldest pipes, laid in the ground in 1915

UPCOMING SEWER PROJECTS



Trash is cleared out of a sewer bypass pump off Broad River Road in 2009.

In the past 15 years, Columbia has actively begun to look for problems in its aging sewer system.

Last year, the city sold \$80 million worth of bonds to make some improvements. Another \$100 million bond issue is in the works. Major sewer projects include:

\$9.9 million

To fix one of the biggest sewer pipes in Columbia, a line extending from Elmwood Avenue to Blossom Street near the Columbia Canal. The line is one of two main pipes that flow directly to the city's wastewater plant on the Congaree River.

\$5 million

For major repairs at its Mill Creek and Broad River pump stations, near the site of a 500,000-gallon spill in January 2009

\$5 million

For upgrades on its North Columbia pump station at Lucius Road, where 20 million gallons of sewage spilled in September 2004

\$4 million

To improve a big sewer line between Brickyard and Monticello roads in northeast Columbia

\$8-9 million

To improve pump stations in West Columbia and on the Saluda River

ANOTHER RATE INCREASE ON THE WAY



\$663 million

Cost of the city's water and sewer upgrade under way

5 percent

The latest rate increase Columbia water and sewer customers could see, beginning July 1

It would be the third increase in four years, with two more expected by 2012, for a total of 25 percent.

In 2006, council members approved a 25 percent water and sewer rate increase to be phased in over five years — about a 5 percent increase each year.

Council members were supposed to raise rates last year but did not because they feared the increase would be too much; the state at the time had the nation's second-highest unemployment rate.

The city already has borrowed \$270 million of the \$663 million plan and is scheduled to borrow \$105 million more before June 30, the end of the city's budget year. That's why city manager Steve Gantt wants council to increase the rates this year.

\$37 million

Amount of revenue generated by the city's last rate hike of 5 percent, in 2008

\$81 million

Because of that rate hike, the amount of money the city was able to borrow for upgrades in 2009

— Staff writers Adam Beam, Sammy Fretwell