

THE CLEAN WATER UTILITY GUIDE TO SURVIVING A CRISIS

Four NACWA Members Share
Lessons Learned

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Foresight and Planning: The Keys to Navigating the Pandemic for Small Utilities

BY BARBARA BIGGS | LITTLETON, CO



Roxborough Water and Sanitation District (RoxWSD) is a small water and wastewater utility serving a foothills suburb southwest of Denver. The District has a population of 11,000 residents but also serves as the contract operator for a nearby fast-growing development projected to have 30,000 residents at build-out. We operate a 6 MGD water treatment plant, distribution system, two wastewater lift stations, and 68 miles of wastewater collection and transmission lines.

RoxWSD is a small utility with a very lean, but efficient operations team. The Director of Operations manages a staff of 4 operators to run the water treatment plant and wastewater lift stations. He also manages the Field Superintendent and three Field Technicians that keep the distribution, collection and transmission systems running smoothly. With an Operations team of 9, there isn't much room for one or two people to get sick and still keep things running smoothly.

Throughout the month of April, all Operations staff went to a split team, one week on/one week off schedule. While we didn't have Operations staff quarantine on-site, all staff were asked to self-quarantine at home to the best of their ability when off-duty, and to use their off-duty weeks to complete training, study for certification exams and work on Standard Operating Procedures. This did, however, mean that routine maintenance was deferred during the time staffing was reduced.

By early May when Colorado transitioned from "Stay at Home" to "Safer at Home," it was obvious we needed to bring Operations personnel back to full staffing. Summer is a busy season for a staff this small – water demand increases dramatically when the water treatment plant goes from operating 16 days in March to 7 days a week in May.

Luckily, we haven't had any sick employees. We also haven't had any trouble obtaining PPE or experienced any chemical shortages. Operators

have been able to practice social distancing, and field staff have gotten very creative at completing necessary maintenance in a stepwise fashion that allows them to work together, apart.

Financially, RoxWSD is fortunate to be in a sound position. Like most utilities, we stopped water shutoffs and assessing late fees in March. To date, we've seen lost revenue of approximately \$10,000 from suspended late fees and penalties. We have seen a noticeable increase in past due accounts.

Unemployment in Colorado has gone from 2.5% to 11.3%, so it's going to be difficult for some of these folks to get caught up. Hopefully, future COVID-19 response legislation will help them out, but if not, we will do our best to work with them to get caught up.

Luckily, we are just finishing an update to our Master Plan and had already identified a number of capital projects to address aging infrastructure and capacity limitations, and we had the foresight to include those projects on the state's eligibility list for SRF funding last year. As a result, we will be well-positioned to take advantage of infrastructure funding included in both the Safe Drinking and Clean Water SRFs.

Probably the biggest challenge for a small utility like RoxWSD during the pandemic has been the multiple roles our employees have to juggle. For example, the Director of Operations is also the Operator in Responsible Charge and Director of Emergency Management and Response, and the General Manager is also the Communications Specialist, Governmental Affairs Officer and Regulatory Compliance Officer. It's part of the fun of working at a small utility but it does give you lots of 3:00 a.m. moments!

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