

Alliance for Innovation 2012 Award Application

J. Robert Havlick and Thomas H. Muehlenbeck Awards

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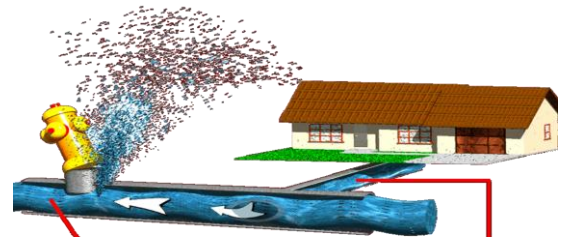


The City of North Port

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The City of North Port, Florida owns and operates the City's Myakkahatchee Creek Water Treatment Plant, providing potable water to over 18,000 customers within the community. The City's Utilities Department is charged with the maintenance and regulatory compliance of the water distribution and sewer collection systems. In order for the City to maintain its compliance with the Federal Safe Drinking Water Act and the State of Florida Administrative Code Chapter 62-555 as regulated by the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, the City was required "to establish and implement a routine cross-connection control program to detect and control cross-connection and prevent backflow of contaminants into the water system." The state and federal mandated requirements included a written plan developed in accordance with the recommended practices for backflow prevention and cross-connection control as set forth in the American Waterworks Association Manual M14.



The City's Utilities Department embarked on their mission to develop such a program, understanding that it would be a difficult and controversial program. The City decided to approach the project from a customer relations standpoint. Public information and neighborhood meetings were scheduled to engage the public in discussions about these requirements. Through all the meetings, the City heard from our customers that there were four key issues that created a unique and complex challenge to the City: community understanding, affordability, convenience and aesthetics.

Immediately the City was faced with developing a program that was sensitive to North Port's residents yet effective in reaching its compliance goals.

Community Understanding



The City developed a community outreach plan that went beyond informing and educating the public on the cross-connection issue, the regulatory requirement placed on the City, and the effects of non-compliance. North Port included customers in developing program options to ease the installation process. The City held numerous public meetings at local neighborhood homeowner associations, mobile home parks, and open houses at the Utility and City Hall buildings. Fliers, media release articles, brochures and bill inserts were created and handed out to the citizens at the Utility offices, community events, and were published on the City website and in local newspapers. The many publications helped educate citizens on ways to protect public health, what cross connection and backflow are, why the backflow preventers are needed, how the backflow preventer protects the public

water supply from a possible cross connection, and why the backflow preventers need to be tested every year. City staff also went above and beyond by making many phone calls and house visits to personally meet with citizens to discuss the ins and outs of the program and importance of the backflow devices to prevent potential cross-connections.

During the outreach efforts, the City gained further understanding of the concerns that North Port's customers expressed. While the City sought to educate the public, it gained a crucial insight into the issues facing its customers that would be key to the program's success.

With the input gained from the initial outreach meetings, it became obvious that effective public relationships would be critical during development and throughout the life of the program for it to be successful.



Affordability and Convenience

Much like the rest of the country, North Port was in the midst of a dramatic economic downturn which saw losses in revenues to the City on top of economic losses for its residents. This made the expense of installation extremely painful, making this program very unpopular with North Port Utility customers.

The City Commission, understanding the need for the program, but unable to find funding for the installation and maintenance within the City operating budget, devised a plan to make the installation of the devices more affordable. The City developed a program known as the "Opt-In Program" to encourage resident cooperation and compliance by providing a Utility administered, convenient installation program with affordable financing options.



The City Commission, being especially sensitive to residents on fixed income and those in difficult financial times, deeply considered the delicate balance of customer sensitivity with the regulatory compliance

and created a visionary finance mechanism. Being that the installation program affected many North Port homes in the older sections of town where many older residents on fixed incomes have settled, the cost for installation however reduced, was still unpopular with many of the City's customers. By allowing the cost of installation to be spread out over 24 months on the resident's water bill, the cost became much more affordable at \$12.71 per month. The City has set itself apart from other backflow programs in the State of Florida by allowing the distribution of the costs into installments on the customer's water bill.

Understanding that customers wanted a program that would be easy and convenient for them, the Opt-In Program also provided for the City's coordination of program installations taking the installation headaches off of customers' shoulders. During the program's development, staff worked to reduce permitting fees and other



plumber overhead concerns in efforts to reduce the costs of installation. With cost savings for customers in mind, staff developed a system for work distribution wherein installations assigned to each plumber are geographically concentrated by street address and due date for compliance (cycles and routes). This concentration would keep the plumbers in the same general area allowing for a reduction in their overhead costs by saving travel time and fuel expenses due to the geographic groupings. Through the competitive bidding process, the City was able to contract with a pool of plumbers, who would make the unpopular expense more affordable.

The organizational development was expanded further with the implementation of a streamlined tracking and communication computer program. This system, specifically designed for backflow programs, allowed staff to efficiently organize plumber work assignments, customer notifications, compliance, and billing to make the most effective use of the department's resources. Further, it allowed for the coordination of convenient scheduling, such as scheduling predominantly seasonal residents for winter installation and testing when those residents are back in North Port, and scheduling schools during summer months to accommodate campus schedules.

Aesthetics

To address a common customer concern regarding the aesthetics of the backflow prevention device, staff researched options for camouflage to make the appearance of the equipment more appealing while providing the necessary access for testing and repairs. Customer solutions were shared as requested and offered freely whenever staff received inquiries on improvement ideas for landscaping.



Successful Compliance

The residential backflow installation program kicked off officially in January of 2011 with a very challenging compliance deadline of December 31, 2011. This required the installation and certification of approximately 4,300 residential backflow prevention devices for existing North Port Utilities customers. As a result of the City's innovative public outreach approach in developing the program, the City of North Port has achieved 100% compliance of all active residential customers. By engaging our customers from the onset and not only encouraging feedback, but tailoring the program to our customers' needs, the City was able to overcome the unique challenges it faced. This program is the direct result of the successful teamwork of North Port's residents and their government.

Lessons Learned

The success of this uniquely challenging program brought the importance of the public relations point of view to the forefront of project development. With the insight gained from North Port's customers through the extensive outreach efforts, the City has learned that focusing on the needs and

communication with its citizens is a key element in the design and implementation of any project or program. Through this project, many long term relationships have been forged with customers that the City may not have otherwise gained. North Port Utilities has taken the lessons learned in this project and applied that same outreach approach to other projects currently underway, with plans to move in this same direction for future programs.

It was with the creative efforts of North Port's dedicated staff, the forward thinking and direction from a truly supportive City Commission and the collaboration with our customers and state and federal agencies, that the City of North Port has become an innovative leader in the State of Florida for cross-connection control compliance. The City's Utility Department has been consulted repeatedly by other municipalities for direction, training and solutions to challenges faced by governments all over the state and even other agencies outside Florida in the development and implementation of a successful and compliant backflow installation program. In the midst of a difficult economic climate, the City's innovative and creative approach exemplify why the City of North Port is a city where one can *Achieve Anything*.

