

Bend SE Sewers

Focus Groups – August 12, 2017

HIGHLIGHTS Rev. 8/24/17

Two focus groups (nine and eight participants per group) were conducted on August 12, 2017 by DHM Research to consider issues surrounding Bend's unsewered neighborhoods. Participants were recruited from project area residents/property owners (first group and half of second group) and citywide residential sewer customers (half of second group). Together, the participants are 40 to 80+ years old. They have lived in Bend from one to 50+ years; most are longtime residents.

Discussion highlights:

- 1. There is a general understanding and reluctant acceptance the area will be sewered.**
Project area residents question why they are being "unfairly singled out" by the City – and there is some hostility and resistance. But they also foresee the current situation as interim, with the Kings Forest area ultimately moving toward sewers.
"I think we're stuck."
"They're going to make us pay, even if we're not hooked up."
"I understand it's coming, so somehow we need to find a solution."
- 2. The shared conclusion is the price tag will be unaffordable** (reportedly \$40-\$90k per property owner). The high number of retirees in the area necessitates the price tag be reduced. Affordability is the overwhelming favorite value chosen to guide the projects.
"Where is the City getting these numbers showing up in the newspaper?"
"There's got to be some type of assistance for property owners."
- 3. Participants report good experiences with their septic systems**—many claiming they have spent little to no money over the years and have had no issues, although most are aware of neighbors with problems. A few acknowledge septic systems don't last forever and they worry about the eventual failure.
"Not all septic systems will fail."
"When septic systems fail, they don't fail over time – it's all at once."
- 4. A deeply held suspicion: the City has a plan but hasn't announced it.** Some think the City appears to be withholding information. The lack of information is causing stress and they want to learn more about what will happen, when, and how much it will cost. Annexation promises from the 1990s continue to arise. As with the Advisory Committee, focus group participants – most of whom are longtime area residents – recall being offered sewer service as part of Bend's annexation package. Now, they want transparency and clarity, including more details on how the current situation threatens public health and the environment.
"They didn't give us the real story." (about annexation)
"I'm still trying to figure out the cost – that's the main thing."
"The City needs to act like they're on our team. I haven't seen any evidence of that."
"Does the City really have an answer? They can't be experts in all of this."

5. **All agree the City and homeowners should share the costs of installing sewers.** The City is thought to be responsible for some of the costs because of the annexation history and the way other parts of the City were sewerred (largely financed with federal dollars). At a minimum, participants conclude the City should pay for the portion of the system that is in the public right of way.
 - "All the people in Bend should help pay."
 - "Keep costs reasonable for all city residents."
6. **Citywide sewer customers are willing to contribute to solving this community-wide problem.** From the perspective of current sewer ratepayers, the idea of septic system homeowners paying their fair share is attractive. But existing sewer customers are also willing to contribute if it is not a lot of money (described by one participant as \$2 or less per month increase on her bill).
 - "There's no outside money." (state and federal grants)
 - "If it's \$2 per month or less, everyone would be willing to pay."
7. **Giving homeowners a way to pay their share over time is much more acceptable** (compared to coming up with the full cost immediately). Ideas discussed include paying up to \$100 per month over many years, or paying off the whole debt when the house is sold, instead of a "lump sum." A "financial counselor" could also be helpful to property owners, some say.
8. **Homeowners are favorably inclined toward options that give them choice**—on financing methods, timing to hook-up, homeowner contractor selection, and where the connection to their property is situated.
9. **People are split on the “go it alone” versus the “areawide” approach.** Both scenarios presented in the focus groups have some appeal. Support for “go it alone” was based on the opportunity to defer cost (for now) and have control of the timing. The “areawide” characterized as a "coordinated approach", its appeal is based on project savings, getting the whole thing over with in a timely manner, and reducing worry.
 - "Why should you replace something that works?" (favors Scenario 1)
 - "I'd like more control. I'm getting stressed by it." (favors Scenario 2)
 - "One-time construction is going to be less expensive." (favors Scenario 2)
10. **Issues related to construction impacts are important, but limited to the loss of mature shrubs and trees.** A high priority is placed on taking steps to minimize construction impacts – esp. maintaining access for emergency vehicles. But participants report the recent sewer work in Kings Forest was well managed by the contractor and neighbors experienced few/no problems.
11. **An unanticipated benefit raised by the groups for hooking up to sewer is gaining the full use of their property:** for decks, hot tubs, shops, RV sheds and other amenities. Currently, affected property owners can't put anything on top of the septic systems.
 - "That's why we don't have a deck or hot tub." (not allowed to build above drainfield)
12. **The Advisory Committee is a strong selling point** with 11 of 17 participants rating it as good/very good reason to support sewers for Kings Forest – if that's the solution reached by area citizen leaders.

A complete summary of focus group results is available, prepared by DHM Research.