

Warwick Sewer System Rules Cause Confusion

The 30-year-old raised ranch was a good fit for Greg Chihoski and his wife when they bought it back in 2009. Chihoski had some extra money at the closing, so he paid off a \$1,700 assessment for the sewer line that been installed in front of his house just south of Conimicut, even though he wasn't hooked in. After all, D.E.M. had tested his septic system and said it worked just fine.

Chihoski said he never expected to hear from the Warwick Sewer Authority again once he settled the debt. But a year and a half later he received a letter from the authority saying he *had* to hook up - and he was facing some serious penalties for not doing so.

"We never had any notice in that year that this was happening," Chihoski tells *The Hummel Report*. "When I called about the assessment, no one mentioned that. It was just boom, here's your violation. You're in violation of this. Right away it said \$1,000 fine and \$100 for every 24 hours. So right away it's like, 'Whoa. What happened?'"

Months turned into years and Chihoski said he couldn't get a straight answer from the WSA or City Hall. Then he heard nothing until a letter arrived June 3 saying his house was moving toward a tax sale in August - just 11 weeks away.

Chihoski panicked and went immediately to the city hall where he said an employee in the tax collector's office confirmed his house was not on any tax sale list.

"He asked to see the letter. I showed him the letter he told me, 'Save this for your lawyer.' He said, 'This is a threat. They're trying to threaten you into paying this.'"

Chihoski's case reflects the confusion we found throughout Warwick about who has to tie into the sewer system, which covers about 70 percent of the city. Many who are hooked into the system want to know why usage rates have increased more than 100 percent in the past six years. Still others want an audit of the sewer authority's books to see where millions of dollars of bond money have gone over the past two decades. And critics say the sewer authority has been overly aggressive in both hookups and billing.

Warwick sewer authority executive director Janine Burke acknowledges usage bills have increased substantially. "There were some major rate increases," she said. "One of the first jobs I got to do when I got here (five years ago) was increase the sewer usage rate. But it hadn't been increased in 10 years."

Burke said she understands why people are upset by the increases, but adds they need to put the rates into perspective. "If you take a look at what a typical resident is paying in comparison to other communities, it's not that outrageous. It just was extremely low before."

While most communities in Rhode Island require anyone with a sewer line in front of their house to connect, a special provision in state law exempts Warwick. Residents here don't have to tie in, unless ownership of the house changes hands. Burke says there are 3,000 households in the city with sewers available that are not hooked in.

So what about Greg Chihoski, who thought his house was going up for tax sale?

Hummel: I have heard from more than a few people that the WSA has been aggressive, in terms of hookups, fees, all of that. Is that a fair characterization?

Burke: No, I don't think so. I think it's a changed method.

Hummel: How in the world did that wording ever make it into a letter?

Burke: This is an unfortunate mistake, you know. I'll be the first one to tell you.

Hummel: These are some of the stories that get out in the community of `Boy, you know what? They're really aggressive there and they want to get as many people hooked up.' But in my mind, that kind of crosses the line.

Burke did not respond, but nodded in agreement.

"It's like dealing with the Mafia," Chihoski said. "It felt like, okay they've got some power, they can make the rules. I'm paying my bills, I pay my mortgage, me and my wife work full time; it just feels like you're almost helpless. Something like this comes along and they threaten to take your house when you're doing everything else right."

The day after we interviewed Burke, she sent Chihoski a letter of apology and said he still has to hook into the system, but could apply to have the penalties waived by the board when he does.

Burke told us the authority is trying to do a better job informing people through local realtors about the mandatory hookup after a sale.

And what if Chihoski had know that back in 2009? Would it have been a deal breaker?

"Yeah, it would have been if we were looking at a \$3,000 to \$4,000 tie-in, we probably would have thought twice."

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