

Blue Ribbon Commission Meeting Minutes

Date: April 1, 2025

Time: 10:00 a.m.

Location: Erie County Office Building Chambers, 247 Columbus Avenue, Sandusky

Welcoming Remarks – Co-Chairman Mike Parker

The meeting was called to order by Co-Chairman **Mike Parker** Roll Call was taken, with all members being present. An attendance sheet was signed by audience members present.

Approval of Minutes

A motion to approve the minutes that were distributed electronically was made by Mr. Tucker and seconded by Mr. Moon. The motion carried unanimously.

Purpose of the Meeting

Mr. Mike Parker (Blue Ribbon Commission) welcomed all participants and provided an overview of the agenda, emphasizing the significance of today's discussion to provide insights into determining what efficiencies the water, sewer and water, and sewer plant operations within the County could gain or are gaining by working together. **Mr. Jeff Krabill and Mr. Kelly Moon** are the Facilitators.

Mr. Jeff Krabill (Blue Ribbon Commission) recognized that there are representatives from several water plants in attendance. He asked them to introduce themselves before the series of questions for the entities are proposed.

City of Sandusky Representatives:

Mr. Aaron Klein – City of Sandusky Director of Public Works

Bill Burch - Water Services Superintendent at Big Island Water Plant

Scott Kromer - Streets & Utilities Superintendent

Jeff Meinert - Wastewater Treatment Plant Superintendent

John Orzech – City Manager

Erie County Representative:

John Rufo – Utilities Director

Village of Milan Representatives:

Brian Rospert - Administrator

Brad Simon – Water Superintendent

City of Sandusky plant statistics:

Big Island Water Plant

- Design flow is 15 ½ million gallons per day (MGD)
- Operational flow is 13 MGD
- Average daily flow is 9 MGD

Sewer Plant

- Operates 15.7 MGD
- Average daily flow is 13 MGD
- 130 miles of water mains with no direct services outside of Erie County
- 165 miles of sewer mains with Erie County contributing to some sewer flow

Mr. Klein noted a third water intake plant located at Sheldons March is a combined effort with an agreement with City and County for water treatment at this facility.

Erie County Statistics:

No water plant

- Purchases bulk water from Cities of Vermilion, Huron, Sandusky

Sawmill Creek Wastewater Plant

- Average daily flow is 2.4 MGD
- Peak flow is 8 MGD
- Expanded to hold more capacity

Huron Basin Wastewater Treatment Plant

- Average daily flow is 2 MGD
- Peak flow is 6 MGD
- 250 miles of water mains
- On the west side of the county – sewage flows to the City sewer plant
- On the east side of the county – sewage flows to the Vermilion sewer plant

Although no one was present from the City of Huron, they once owned a sewer plant many years ago but Erie County now receives the sewage that goes to either Sawmill Creek Wastewater Plant or the Huron Basin Plant to be treated.

Village of Milan statistics:

Water Plant

- In 2017, the Village elected to purchase their water from Erie County and decommissioned their water plant.
- Purchase 45million gallons and use between 150,000 and 170,000 gallons per day

Sewer Plant

- Can hold 350,000 gallons per day
- Average daily flow is 150,000 gallons per day
- 115 miles of water mains
- 20 miles of sewer mains

Mr. Kelly Moon (Blue Ribbon Commission) read aloud the questions submitted for today's meeting:

Review

- Vermilion, Sandusky, Huron operate water and sewer plants. Are the cities satisfied that they are maximizing production capacity? Like baseload electric power plants, operation at near or full capacity can reduce costs per units measured of production.
 - City of Sandusky – Mr. Burch stated that the water plant's has an operational flow of 13 MGD, with average daily flow around 9 MGD. The City would like to sell more water, but are satisfied with current capacity. The Wastewater plant has a CSO (Combined Sewer Flow) in place that has made it possible to reduce 95% of the City's sewer overflows into the lake since the 90's. City does not have a mandate.
 - Village of Milan – satisfied
 - Erie County – Erie County is satisfied with their capacity but does have an internal bypass at Sawmill Plant. This has caused Erie County to expand the Sawmill Plant due to overflows. The EPA has given Erie County an Administrative Order to eliminate the I&I (inflow and infiltration) that leads to raw sewage overflowing into the Lake

Ms. Nicole Spriggs (audience member) asked about the possibility of closing the smaller package plants and combine with the county, for example the one near Vermilion.

- Erie County - Mr. Rufo stated the package plants only typically treat 10-20 houses and the cost could be high to keep them up-to-date. Mr. Rufo has had discussions with the citizens in various Townships about them closing their package plants and connecting into the county sewer system, but has been met with resistance in several instances.
- Condition of water plants acceptable?
 - City of Sandusky – Mr. Klein stated the City has a five-year capital plan, but tend to plan 10-20 years out based on need of updates. There are always upgrades needed especially technology to be more efficient.
- Major maintenance, Capital improvements or extra capacity needed in the near future (less than 5 years)? Long term - > 5 years?
 - **Mr. Tim Coleman** (Perkins Township Trustee) stated the need to ensure there is enough capacity for water and sewer for future development in locations such as Route 4. Not having enough capacity, could stall economic development

Mr. Krabill noted that wastewater comes through the county system, even though County purchases water from the City, the sewage goes straight to the City of Sandusky wastewater plant. Mr. Krabill asked if the City and/or County could speak on this issue. Based on Mr. Coleman's comment above, Mr. Krabill believes the capacity of the plants is not the issue but the size of the lines that serve those areas are the issue.

- **Mr. John Orzech** (City of Sandusky Manager) noted that the City and County worked together with the Village of Bayview to expand their sewer capacity. Water lines tend to be easier to work together on where sewer lines are more challenging, but have been open to working together.
- Mr. Klein corrected Mr. Krabill from his earlier comment, stating the sewer lines go through County sewer system first then goes through Sandusky's system.

Mr. Krabill explained that over the last three to five years, the City of Sandusky has been going through a series of projects separating storm water and sanitary sewer lines. Mr. Krabill asked how much has been accomplished with this project and what has it done to the volume that goes through the sewage treatment plant.

- City of Sandusky - Mr. Klein has yet to evaluate volume differences going into the plant, due to latest weather conditions and bay levels, but hopeful to see them reduced. Over the last several years, the City has focused on reducing the amount of sewage going into the lake, which has increased the amount of sewage going to the wastewater plant. Along with additional sewage, the rain events have increased in intensity under shorter durations. Because of these events, some of the older sewer systems do not have capacity to handle the extra load. The City tries to do what they can, within current financial capacities, to eliminate basement backups as much as possible too. The City completed a series of sewer projects that redirected flow from the eastside lift station. The City has reduced its flow from the eastside because the County was sending more water to those lift stations. This process has been a coordinated effort on all parties to reduce and minimize issues.
- Would centralized dispatching of water from the plants conceivably reduce costs? Leads into next question;
- What about centralized maintenance planning and capital improvement coordination like a rural water district, but just for plants?
 - Mr. Parker clarified the question stating if there are three plants, would it be better suited to combine plants and resources. No comment was made.
- Is routine maintenance primarily in-house or contract?
 - City of Sandusky - currently uses in-house staff for maintenance
 - Water - two full-time
 - Wastewater - four full-time
 - Sewer – 11 full-time
 - Utility operators to fill in
 - Mutual agreement with Erie County, including all entities in Erie County, for combined maintenance services. It was noted this agreement is not utilized often.

- Erie County - currently uses in-house staff for maintenance
 - Staff has been reduced, but runs more efficiently with many staff being cross-trained and has saved money by doing projects in-house
- Village of Milan - in-house and outsource work
- Are plant operators & maintenance personnel effectively utilized or used in other capacities during “down” time? Or could there be a “traveling” maintenance crew within the county?
 - Erie County and the City of Sandusky both indicated that they cross train, work during down time not discussed.
- Costs per units measured /customer for Erie County, Sandusky, Huron, Vermilion
 - No data provided
- All other performance indicators tracked by water departments’ management
 - Erie County – water distribution division metrics are tracked through a metrics program and submitted to Ohio EPA every year.
 - Sub-Committee will send email to collect metrics data

Mr. Jason Dulaney (audience member) asked if the Commission can include in the data request the “mean” time it takes from when a pump fails, like lift station pumps, to the time it gets fixed and put back online. Mr. Dulaney stated lift station pumps plug regularly with rags and someone needs to go pull rags out of the lift station. He would be curious to know how long it takes for that pump to plug and then the response time to service the pump to get the pump put back online.

- City of Sandusky – Mr. Klein stated the City makes a concerted effort to update the lift stations and provide routine maintenance to keep the pumps in working order to prevent fails. City does not keep track of this data. If a pump fails and the alarm sounds, crews respond.

Ms. Nicole Spriggs (audience member) asked what the useful life of a water or sewer line? She inquired if parts for replacing these lines could be purchased on an economy of scale.

- City of Sandusky – Mr. Klein stated there are many factors that go into the life of a water or sewer pipe. Some last 100 years, some less. The City uses 60 pounds of pressure to ensure that the pipes last longer. Tend to target the pipes that have repeated main breaks.
- Erie County – In areas where pipes have repeated main breaks, they will be prioritized to be replaced before others.

Mr. Dulaney noted there is a software program developed that the City of Cincinnati implemented. This coordinated software is available to their water and wastewater divisions, roads division, and lighting divisions. As an example, this program displays a heat map that shows lead tap replacements, which is required by EPA. Because of this unified software platform, a coordinated effort can take place with other divisions within the City and work together to schedule projects.

- Erie County – has been advancing technologies with their ArcGIS tracking software that has heat maps, showing main breaks for instance. This system assists with planning the most cost effective and efficient way to replace pipes and is crucial to their department.

Mr. Krabill asked if the ArcGIS software can be shared with other entities, with Mr. Rufo responding yes. Mr. Krabill noted this software, with coordinated effort, would provide an important role with sewers and roads in all of Erie County.

- City of Sandusky – expanded their GIS software and city has annual meetings with all utility companies to keep them informed of their projects for the year.

Mr. Krabill inquired about the lining process each entity takes with aging sewer lines. This lining process helps to eliminate the infiltration of storm water into the lake. Could the entities present discuss the pros and cons of doing that? Who's doing it?

- Erie County – over the last 6-7 years, the County has been choosing areas that have the largest I&I issues and then perform rehab projects in those zones. These projects consist of lining manholes, sewer main, and private service laterals out to the right-of-way. Mr. Rufo stated that this process has been very beneficial for Erie County and has found that, by doing these repairs, sewer lines are lasting an additional 40 years without issues. The County spends between \$500,000 and \$1 million in lining projects each year, which directly affects sewers that serve about 150 houses with each project.
- City of Sandusky – Spend usually \$100,000 on sewer main lining per year. Along with I&I, the City reports tree roots as a problem with the older systems. If the I&I in the system is from private laterals, the City cannot fix those lines. Mr. Klein stated the City spends approximately \$100,000 per year, which affects 8-10 city blocks.
- Village of Milan – Since Milan has 800 sewer customers, a contractor is hired to clean their sewers. Village of Milan contacted Erie County regarding the sewer lining projects, but the expense was too large for the Village to take on. Water main breaks are handled in-house

- Activities planned or in progress to improve efficiency
 - Maintenance of current pipes ongoing.
 - The City and County could collaborate on projects that are located in close proximity of each other. Combining contracts could cut down on the cost
 - ArcGIS software is being utilized by entities for main breaks and where to replace.
- Financial incentives for regionalization at state level
 - Erie County - Potential saving on forgiveness funding grants and interest free loans. Example: Aqua, Ohio received \$1.9 million in principal forgiveness on a \$3.8 million regionalization project in 2021 through Ohio's PFAS action plan. This project eliminated 13 small water systems.

Another example, West Milton, Ohio received \$500,000 in funding to sewer a non-sewered failing septic system area.

- The use of TIF's
- Impact of water and sewer on development
- Could capacity or lack thereof hinder future development
 - Erie County – not having utilities available and capacity are direct limitations on development. Example, Waterwood Development, East of Huron, is funding the project to replace the waterline on Route 6. Love's Travel Stop invested in the sewer extension on US Route 250. Ardaugh invested in the Sawmill Parkway Sewer lift station that was replaced and expanded in order for the company to move to Huron.

Ms. Spriggs stated, by having the developer pay for these projects, it could also discourage development in our area. Mr. Rufo noted that if Erie County took on that debt, it would have to pass along to the residents. By the developer paying for these projects, it has allowed businesses to come to Erie County without extra debt for Erie County residents.

Mr. Hank Solowiej (Erie County Administrator) explained that Tax Incentive Financing (TIF) Agreements are utilized for these infrastructure projects. This agreement is made between the developer and Erie County. The developer will own the bond and there will be no risk to Erie County. TIF's provide tax incentives for the developer, so that the developer will recoup some payment that was used to pay for these projects.

- City of Sandusky – **City Manager John Orzech** stated the City is supportive of any economic development in our area. The City recognizes the importance of housing and jobs in Erie County and are a willing partner in any way they can be.
- What have other governments done to remove themselves from the public utility (e.x. regional districts)
- How do EPA mandates change or delay actions as regional entities work to collaborate locally
 - Erie County – EPA mandates change how Erie County operates. Erie County is currently on a mandate, but no indication that would delay entities to work together.
 - Village of Milan – no current mandates
 - City of Sandusky – no mandates, but the EPA does annual water inspections. New rules and regulations are implemented into the National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES permit) that the City has to follow, but the City is under no findings and orders. Mr. Klein noted that the City has a good working relationship with EPA. The City took a creative approach with these projects and the EPA signed off on these ideas.

- Entities seemed open to the idea on collaboration of sewer and water projects if align.

Mr. Matt Old (Erie County Commissioner) explained that the NPDES is a permit that contains limits on what can be discharged into the lake and has monitoring and reporting requirements. It may not be a mandate, but permits are an agreement between the entity and EPA to make changes. The City of Sandusky has an agreement with Ohio EPA to make \$400 million upgrades to the wastewater plant and sewer system of which the County has to pay for half. Erie County will have to pass on some of these expenses to the taxpayers.

Meeting Summary

Mr. Parker provided a summary of key points from today's meeting:

- Entities believe their facilities are structurally sound and capacity is in good shape
- Cross training is done among all employees at all entities and sharing resources
- The City of Sandusky shares their five-year plan with utilities company and other entities
- There is a possibility of expanding the use of the ArcGIS software program
- I&I inflow and infiltration projects can potentially be combined among entities if the projects align
- TIF's are good incentives to assist with funding large water and sewer projects expansion and infrastructure
- The City of Sandusky is under agreements for \$400 million to our taxpayers right now.

Adjournment

Next Meeting: Scheduled for Tuesday, April 8, 2025 at the Office Building, 247 Columbus Avenue, Sandusky at 10:00 a.m.

Topic Discussion: Public Transportation

Facilitators: Ms. Balconi Ghezzi and Mr. Krabill

A motion to adjourn was made by Mr. Parker and seconded by Mr. Krabill. The motion carried unanimously.