

## **FIRST STOP PLANNING ASSISTANCE**

Municipal utilities in Oregon, especially at the “Small-Cities” scale (i.e., <5,000), continue to be challenged in meeting the array of requirements related to Clean Water Act elements as they pertain to municipal services. These challenges are directly related to financing, affordability, and technical capacity. Steady or declining population growth (rate base), aging infrastructure, energy costs, and increases in the complexity of water quality standards. Navigating this array is time consuming and can logistically and financially overwhelm a small city, particularly in rural settings.

These challenges are regional in scope. For the NE and Greater Eastern Regional Solutions Center and its region (Grant, Harney, Malheur, Baker, Union, Wallowa, Umatilla, and Morrow Counties), the vast majority of city customers are “small cities” by definition having less than 5,000 people. Based on the 2010 census, 88% of the region is composed of small cities (and 67% of these have populations less than 1,000).

In May of 2013, the USDA, Rural Communities Assistance Corporation, DEQ and IFA released guidance on preparing wastewater planning applications for projects that are to be funded with public monies. This published guidance provides for customers/utilities to host a “Kick-off” meeting after a determination is made that a facilities plan update is needed, after the project design approach is selected, after an application for funding has been submitted, and after entering into a contract with a consultant.

In August of 2013 the Governor’s Office Regional Coordinator, Scott Fairley, requested DEQ and Business Oregon’s Infrastructure Finance Authority (IFA) to develop and present a process where our small city customers, when faced with large municipal capital project requirements, might benefit from early conversations with DEQ and IFA on infrastructure design concepts and funding options—before an actual project is identified and before funding for it is sought. The Governor’s Office request was memorialized by establishing the request as a Regional Solutions Center (RSC) project and was published in the RSC ongoing project lists. This memorandum describes that project and process.

For the purpose of this Memorandum it is first important to note what the “First Stop” pre-project planning assistance model is not. It is not a Kick-off meeting as described in the 2013 Wastewater Planning guidance. It is not a “One-stop” funding meeting. It does not predict that state agencies will provide project design, specification, or funding certainty.

Rather, the intent of a First Stop, hosted prior to any *Kick-off* or *First Stop* meetings, is to:

- 1) Host open discussion on **potentially approvable municipal system design alternatives**. The focus of the discussion should be on the needs for facilities planning, what documents may be required, the pertinent regulations that drive the identified needs, and

- on ideas and concepts that might reasonably provide customers with predictable and/or viable project approaches (as opposed to “certainty”) that can meet the identified needs;
- 2) Discuss what **funding sources/approaches** align with facility needs, planning documents, regulations, and project concepts through IFA/Clean Water State Revolving Fund (CWSRF) and/or other available financing programs -- along with funding application guidance, application review and approval timelines;
  - 3) **Identify the specific interagency team** that will serve the customer through the infrastructure upgrade process. Discussion here can also include definition of roles and responsibilities;
  - 4) **Structure an open, inclusive, and transparent communications plan/strategy** for the benefit of the customer that will be used throughout the infrastructure upgrade process. Through the enhanced tactical relationships established in the First Stop, participants should err toward more inclusive and frequent communication than less;
  - 5) **Insure thorough meeting notes** are taken (arranged by project host) and subsequently shared with participants; and
  - 6) Insure meetings are concluded with **follow-up commitment assignments** (*Next Steps*) and due dates. This is coordinated by the project host(s).

A First Stop meeting may be called and coordinated by a variety of engaged people. Cities, utilities, agency managers, permit writers, water quality engineers, regional coordinators, Regional Solutions staff, and consulting engineers can use this guide when it appears an infrastructure project will be required to address water/wastewater system deficiencies, modify or upgrade a wastewater facility, and/or when OBDD-IFA funds are sought for such capital projects.