



Interviews with Local Government Officials

Gaining Public Support for Water Infrastructure Costs:

Freeport, Illinois

Jim Glitz, former Mayor

Freeport is a community of 28,000 located in the northern part of Illinois approximately 15 miles from the Wisconsin border. The economy of Freeport is based mainly on manufacturing; the city is home to Rubbermaid, Microswitch, and Kelly Springfield Tire, as well as several banking and insurance companies. Freeport has a history of wet weather-related sewer problems due to the city's varied terrain. In the 1930s, the city covered a creek running through a low-lying section of the city called the Homer Street area, installed a storm sewer where the creek had been, and began building houses on the reclaimed land. In the 1960s, housing developments to the west of the Homer Street area increased the runoff to this area so much that 40 percent of the city's entire volume of storm water runoff drained to this one area. The combination of increased runoff from growth and a lack of maintenance on the sewer system led to frequent flooding in this area of the city. Similar problems existed in three other areas of the City, including a low-laying area close to the Pecatonica River.

Responsibility for Freeport's water-related infrastructure was shared between the Water and Sewer Commission (WSC) and the Public Works Department until recently when storm sewers were also shifted to the WSC. The WSC oversaw drinking water and sanitary sewer infrastructure, and the Public Works Department managed storm sewers and other non-water related infrastructure, such as streets. The WSC is a semi-autonomous entity; the Mayor appoints members of the Commission who then elect a director. The City Council approves the WSC's budget, but the commission is not directly responsible to the City Council or the Mayor. In contrast, the Public Works Department is directly administered by the Mayor, as the city's Chief Administrator.

Mr. Glitz's involvement with the City of Freeport began in the mid-1980s. After serving 4 years in the Illinois State Senate and attending law school, Mr. Glitz began working with citizens of Freeport who were concerned with the frequent **storm sewer overflows**. Collaborating with the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency (IEPA), the citizens of Freeport and Mr. Glitz filed a citizens' complaint against the city, with the Illinois Pollution Control Board (IPCB). The outcome of the suit was an IPCB order requiring the city to submit a plan to rectify the situation. The issue came before the IPCB again when the citizens moved to hold the city in

contempt for not completing the actions outlined in their mitigation plan. The IPCB again ruled in favor of the citizens. The city appealed to a State Appellate Court, but the court upheld the IPCB ruling in favor of the citizens.

In 1989, following the citizen suits, the incumbent Mayor of Freeport was defeated after 20 years in office. The new mayor, Mr. Weis, spent millions of dollars to improve Freeport's sewer system, finance the installation of a detention pond, and rehabilitate and replace sewer lines in various parts of the



city. Despite these efforts, artificially depressed water rates and the absence of a dependable revenue source limited the effectiveness of these improvements, and many of Freeport's infrastructure problems continued.

In 1997, Mr. Glitz was elected Mayor of Freeport. One of his first actions was to approve a WSC proposal to hire a **private contractor**, United Water, to manage Freeport's sanitary sewer system. This arrangement gave United Water managerial authority within the WSC; however, United Water was still directly accountable to the Mayor and City Council. City employees kept their jobs in the WSC, and continued to be City employees.

In response to new EPA regulations, Mayor Glitz also worked with United Water and IEPA to expand the sanitary sewer plant and to rebuild the sanitary sewer system. The city invested almost \$14 million to meet these new requirements. After meeting these regulatory deadlines, Mayor Glitz and the City Council focused on improving Freeport's problematic storm sewer system. In 1999, Mayor Glitz recommended consolidating all water-related services under the Public Works Department so that the expertise of the sanitary sewer staff could be applied to the storm sewer system. After the merger,

the WSC would become an infrastructure planning commission for long-term issues. This proposal was not approved by the City Council in part because of union opposition. Mayor Gitz then presented an alternate proposal to shift responsibility for the storm sewer system to the WSC so that both the sanitary and storm sewer system would be under common management. This plan was more politically agreeable and was approved by the City Council.

Despite Freeport's investments in the sanitary sewer system, a lack of consistent revenue to support the storm sewer water systems continued to be a problem. In 2001, several severe rainstorms, including a hundred-year rain event, pounded northern Illinois. The damage was so widespread that the governor proclaimed a statewide disaster. In Freeport, the Homer Street area and several other sections of the city were flooded due to **inadequate storm sewer capacity**. At this point the IEPA urged Freeport to make rapid and drastic improvements to its storm sewer system. Mayor Gitz and the WSC worked with IEPA to: 1) demonstrate that the city had already made millions of dollars of improvements to the system; and 2) to develop a plan for further infrastructure improvements to the storm water system.

After the 2001 floods, Freeport implemented a storm sewer fee. The city also used bonds to fund several infrastructure improvements, including the installation of an additional storm sewer line through the central downtown area, which enhanced the capacity of the storm sewer system. The city also purchased the homes in the Homer Street area that abutted the covered creek, razed them, and made close to \$9 million worth of improvements in all. The city also applied for and received grants to make sanitary and storm water improvements in eligible neighborhoods.

Mobilizing public support for these infrastructure improvements was difficult, because the community was accustomed to artificially low rates. Historically, Freeport's rates have been lower than most comparable municipalities. By emphasizing the fact that Freeport needed to grow and that Freeport had underinvested in their infrastructure for many years, the Mayor and City Council were able to create public support for the infrastructure initiative. Also, citizens living in low-lying areas of the city were very vocal in their support for capital improvements, helping to convince the rest of the citizens about the need to pay for the work. Mayor Gitz and City Council also created support by framing the rate increase in the context of the well being of the community. They reminded citizens that adequate infrastructure and quality neighborhoods are necessary to attract businesses. This argu-

ment was especially effective, as many businesses in Freeport had recently closed.

Mayor Gitz was defeated after his second 4-year term and drew several conclusions from his experiences. He recognizes that poor planning in Freeport led to significant problems for the city. The lack of investment in the city's infrastructure from 1965 to 1985 meant that the technical challenges of meeting new EPA requirements were greater and that the city faced huge expenses to fix problems that could have been prevented or mitigated. Mr. Gitz believes that consistently investing in infrastructure is more cost-effective than only investing when problems arise. He recommends **communicating early and often** with the public to explain the true costs of failing to invest in infrastructure improvements (e.g., lowered quality of life, public health repercussions, and unattractiveness to businesses). He also encourages municipalities to think of state and federal agencies as allies that can help cities to meet their common goals. He further believes that it is important to put water and sewer functions under one umbrella to facilitate coordinated management and planning. In Freeport's case, the problems were accentuated by having sanitary sewers and storm sewers managed under separate under-funded authorities.

Since Mr. Gitz left office, there has been an outcry against water and sewer rate increases. Because Freeport has not grown as quickly as expected and because several companies have left the city, fewer users are left to support the cost of infrastructure improvements. The WSC's contract with United Water is criticized, and the future of additional infrastructure improvements is uncertain. However, policies initiated during Mayor Gitz's and Mayor Weis' (Gitz's predecessor) terms, such as systematically replacing old sewer lines and requiring storm sewers or drainage plans in new developments, may encourage a forward-looking attitude toward infrastructure investment.