

CITY OF DETROIT

News Release

Water and Sewerage Department

Dave Bing, Mayor

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Cold weather and water main breaks

While it may seem as if there have been an unusually high number of water main breaks recently, the number is actually below normal for this time of year. What we have experienced is an extremely cold winter. Temperature extremes (either very hot or very cold) are one of the most common reasons that mains break. Add aging infrastructure (old pipes) to the mix, and the number of water main breaks experienced will substantially increase.

The fact remains that when you are responsible for thousands of miles of water mains, there will be main breaks. But whether the number of breaks is unusually high, or below normal, it's always serious when it happens to YOU.

When a water main break does occur in your neighborhood, the repair is the result of a process that can be broken down into six steps.

The process begins (step one) when a residential or commercial customer (our eyes and ears) calls DWSD's 24-hour emergency Maintenance and Repair Center (313-267-7401) to report a problem. The issue can be low water pressure, no water flow at all, or perhaps they may see water flowing freely in the street and are calling to report the fact. DWSD goes into action when that call is received. A ticket for the incident is created and entered into the system.

For the second step, DWSD investigators go to the scene, where they may employ probes, or other specialized tools to determine the location and severity of a leak. A supervisor then prioritizes the main break (step three), basing his determination on information gathered from various sources, including the investigators.

Once a priority for the main break is assigned, MISS DIG (an excavation safety and utility damage-prevention company) is called. Water mains are almost always located deeper in the ground than other utilities. That means that natural gas lines, electrical and cable may be located above the water main. For this reason the location of other utility lines must be clearly identified before any work begins to avoid damaging them.

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After all underground utilities are identified and marked, the repair crew arrives at the site of the main break. This is step four. Before starting work, the crew notifies residents on the street that water service will be temporarily shut off. Residents are advised to use this opportunity to draw as much water as they will need for a few hours.

The field crew locates the actual break with special tools such as an aquaphone. Once the break is located, the crew probes the area to zero in on the exact point of the break, which is where the sound of flowing water is the loudest. Once the exact location of the break is identified, the flow of water to the affected section is shut down, and the crew begins digging.

The amount or time it takes to repair a break depends on the kind of break involved. One common type is known as a “crack-around” the circumference of the pipe. This type of leak can be sealed with clamps tightened down over the fissure. Another common type frequently occurs with older pipes. Water in mains is transported under high pressure capable of bursting a pipe at a weak or damaged spot. For this type of break, the bad section of pipe is cut out and replaced with a new section sealed in place with couplings. The sealing of the pipe is step five.

For the sixth and final step, the crew tests the seal and bleeds any air that has seeped into the line. This is accomplished by opening a fire hydrant in the vicinity of the main break, and allowing the water to flow through the newly repaired section. Normal water flow is then restored to the repaired section of main, and pressure is allowed to stabilize. The hole is then filled and any necessary repairs are administered to any broken portions of street or sidewalk.

Remember, to report a broken water main in your neighborhood, call DWSD’s 24-hour Emergency number at (313) 267-7401.

DWSD supplies high-quality drinking water to 4.3 million people who live and work in Detroit and 126 other communities in southeast Michigan. The Department provides wastewater services to three million people who live and work in Detroit and 76 other southeast Michigan communities.

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