Home Sewer Line Issues
A Guide for
Orange Hunt Estates Homeowners

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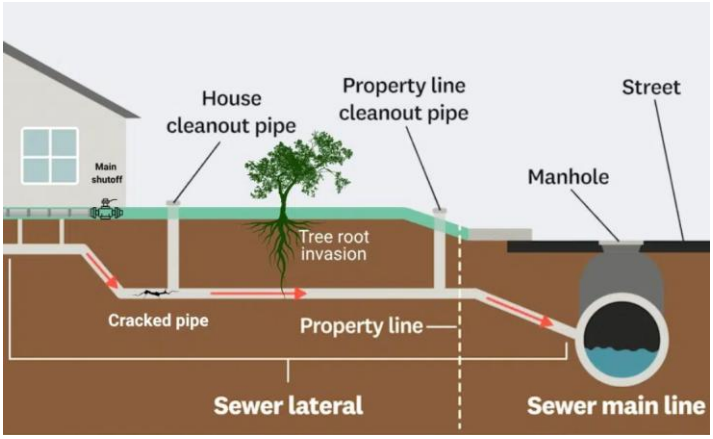
THE OBJECTIVE. The impetus for my wanting to explore sanitary sewer problem experiences with OHECA members was the confusion and uncertainty I was observing concerning the HomeServe sewer and water line warranty offers periodically mailed to us by Dominion Power. Some questioned the authenticity or the value of this coverage. I knew from my observation over years living in Orange Hunt Estates that some in our community were the unfortunate recipients of a sewer pipe break, blockage, or backup, so I asked for your help in relating your experiences. My objective was to share those experiences and lessons learned with other members. I supplemented that with some online research and discussions with a couple plumbing services and a Fairfax County Department of Public Works and Environmental Services (DPWES) staff member. I've assembled findings that I hope will assist you in contemplating what's best for your situation regarding preventative measures and planning for, and reacting to, a possible sewer lateral clog or backup.

Although this analysis does not cover water supply lines, some of the same issues regarding sewer line repair, replacement, warranties, and insurance likely apply to water lines, as well.

WASTE WATER PLUMBING. A sewer lateral collects all the waste water you produce from your home and delivers it underground, normally from the front of your house, to a county sanitary sewer main under your frontage street. However, the lateral for some homes exits out the side to facilitate connection to a main under a corner street or one that runs along an easement under the common property line of two neighboring homes. This happens most often in cul-de-sacs and corner homes.



Some homes have one or two clean-outs exposed in the front yard, which mark the location of the lateral. The clean-outs normally are associated with post-construction lateral repair or replacement that necessitated trenching down to the lateral. They provide future camera inspection and cleaning device access. Two homeowners reported clean-outs that apparently are associated with the original lateral emplacement: A cast iron cleanout in an older home and an ABS one in a newer home. However, this situation seems rare based on homeowner responses and its uniqueness to these two homes is unexplained.

A series of pipes, known as secondary plumbing, run from your various plumbing fixtures (e.g., sinks, showers) that are approximately vertically stacked to merge into a larger primary waste collection and venting conduit in the basement. This is also known as a main stack. It is a pipe, usually 3 or 4 inches in diameter, that enters the concrete slab of the home. This may be present in the first floor utility room of a home without a basement. Many homes apparently have a secondary main stack to service a toilet some distance from other bathrooms.

Some smaller secondary service lines enter the slab separately and connect with the primary waste pipe under the slab. This generally happens when some fixtures cannot permit a proper drainage slope to the main stack without interfering with living space.. For example, my two back-to-back primary bathrooms in my rambler have drainage lines that exit through the floor to the primary waste pipe in the basement almost directly below, approximately in the center of the home. However, the kitchen sink and dishwasher are at one end of the house and drain straight down a single pipe in the adjacent outside wall into the slab, from where it runs under the basement floor a few tens of feet to connect to the primary waste pipe under the slab. My basement laundry tub and bathroom also drain separately into the slab.

Thus, there is a network of pipes under the slab that eventually connects to one main pipe, that in turn connects to the outside lateral through the foundation. A homeowner’s nightmare is for a problem to arise somewhere in this sub-slab environment that requires cutting and jack hammering through the concrete to expose a pipe, or pipes, for repair. The repair work is messy, and in a finished basement the labor required to return it to pre-repair condition can be expensive and time consuming.

The primary waste pipes as originally installed in our community are cast iron and ABS. Originally, they would have clean-outs of the same material, but some have PVC replacement sections reflective of corroded cast iron clean-out caps, pipe leaks, or basement bathroom remodeling work. One resident stated that a crack in her cast iron waste pipe was fixed inexpensively by a plumber with a topical application of a substance (a type of epoxy?) that has worked for about 10 years before the crack is starting to reappear. In our community, the secondary pipes appear always to be black ABS plastic composition. In the older homes they connect to cast iron pipes at floor level, but in newer homes the ABS pipes enter the slab.

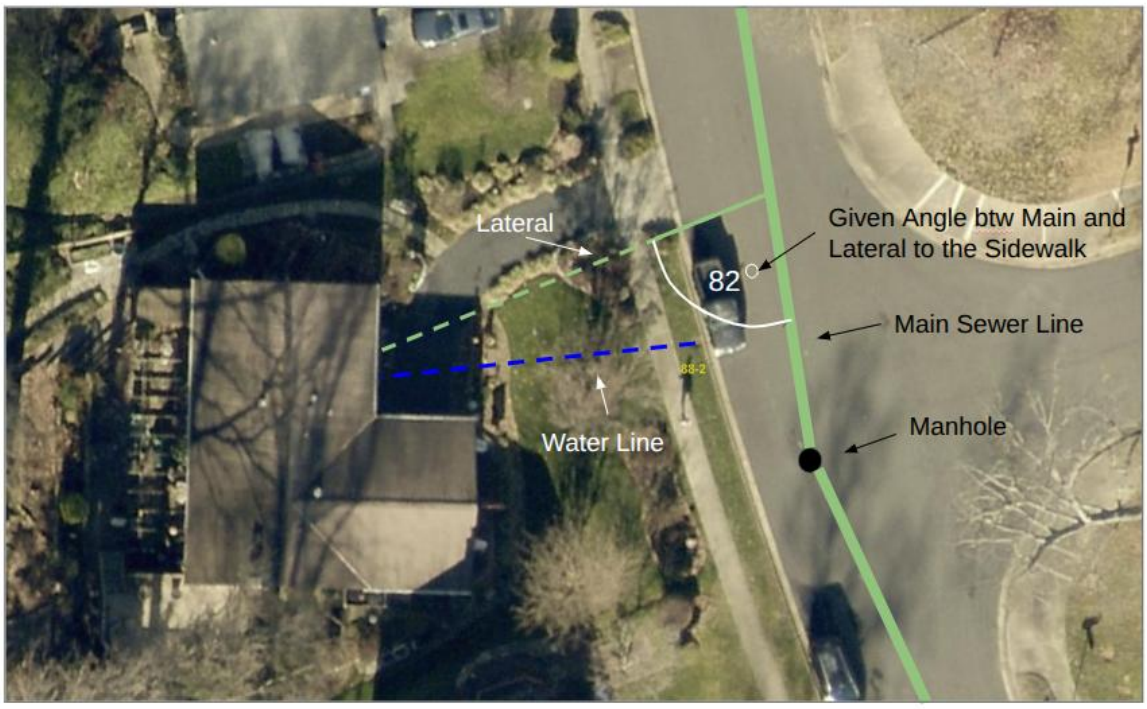
The homeowner is responsible for repair or replacement of the lateral all the way to the main. The lateral is buried at various depths under the property, depending on the elevation difference to the main. The main is county responsibility. Manholes spaced along your street provide county access to the sewer main. It's when there is an obstruction to the free flow of waste water through the lateral that

you can experience drainage issues or even a sewage backup needing expensive remediation.

It may be useful to identify the route of your lateral under your property in advance of any trouble. This can help you plan for the type of repair or replacement that is best for you. Also, you will know where not to plant trees or construct expensive or elaborate landscaping features that may have to be removed or dismantled. If you have already built walls, planted trees, made planting beds, installed a fountain, or embedded an irrigation system, you will know where digging may be required and how to plan for minimizing the disruption or damage to these elements. The plumbing contractor will backfill any trenching and return sod or sow grass seed. Expect some settling over the course of several months that you will have to deal with. Also, returning more elaborate landscaping to its original form will add more cost that you, the homeowner, must bear. One plumber offered that tunneling is sometimes possible to not disrupt a landscaping feature, and there are other possible trenchless solutions cited later. Different plumbing contractors may differ in their fixing philosophies and capabilities.

You can gain an overview of the network of sewer mains in your area using this link. (In the left column scroll to Sanitary Sewer Map. Enter the Map Tile 88-2, 88-4, or 89-1, depending where in the community you live.) If you want to see the exact location of where your lateral connects to the main, submit an online request to the DPWES here. A digital diagram response was very prompt, when I did it. The DPWES diagram also includes the location of the storm drain system and any easements that may be on your property for the separate sewer and stormwater systems. The diagram will show the lateral route from the main to the sidewalk, but not across the homeowner's property. The county's Land Development Services used to maintain construction records that showed the lateral locations on private property, but it now destroys them three years after the final inspection, i.e., they don't exist as a reference for us.

Laterals generally run in a straight line from the house to the main. You can estimate the lateral's path under your property by projecting a line from about where you believe the home's main collector waste pipe exits the foundation to the sidewalk junction revealed in the DPWES diagram. Any clean-outs in the yard will assist. I superimposed the diagram data I received from DPWES onto satellite imagery of my property and estimated that my lateral runs below the driveway, low planter stone walls, flower beds, and possibly my sidewalk lamp post!



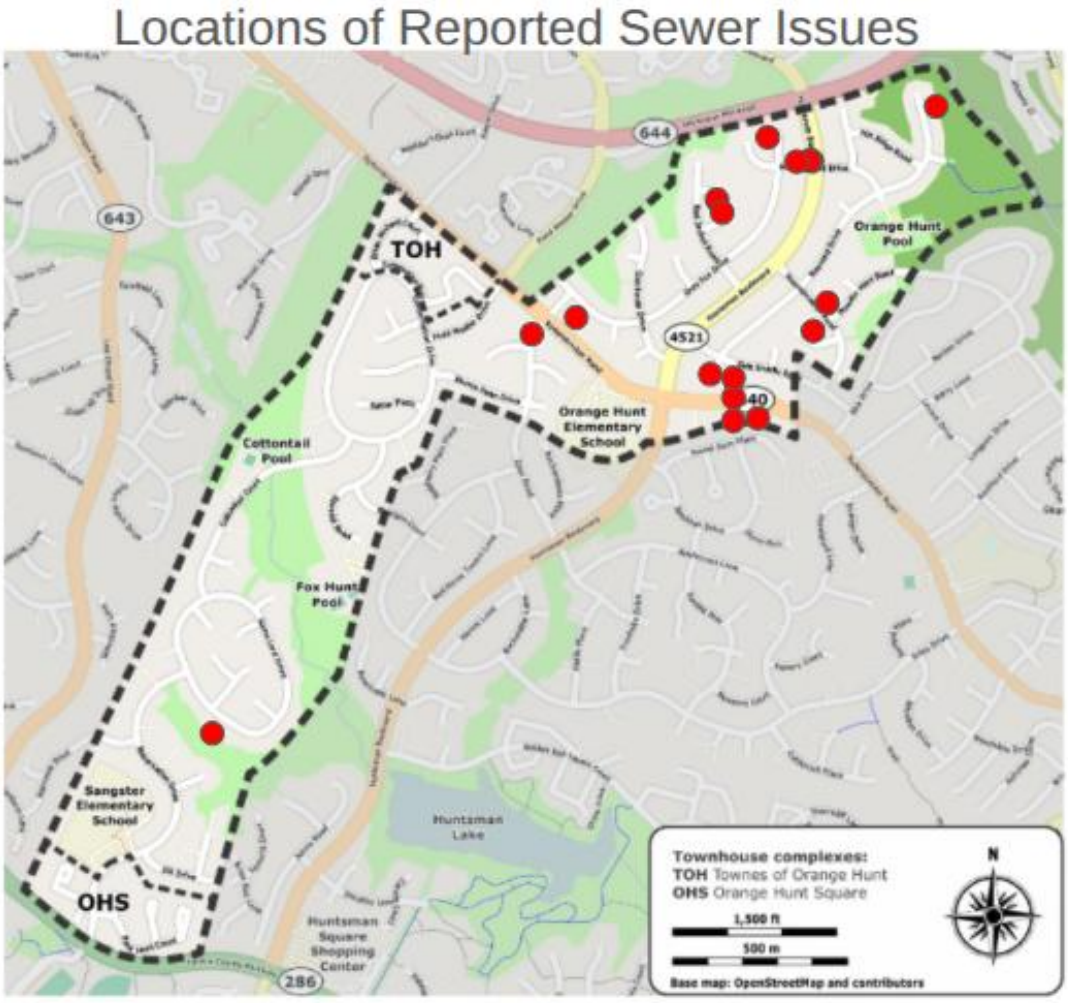
However, laterals don't always travel a straight path, according to one plumber. You will have to hire a plumber if you want to accurately locate your lateral. This could be done in conjunction with a camera pipe inspection. Expect to pay about $700 for this service.

SURVEY RESPONSES. Several OHECA members responded to the sewer line survey about problems they or their neighbors experienced. They identified 16 homes that experienced sewer lateral clogs or breaks that required cleaning, repair, or replacement. Fifteen occurrences happened in homes between Old Keene Mill Rd and Sydenstricker Rd. A single incident was reported in one home in the newer half of the community south of Sydenstricker Rd. Why there is this large disparity in incidents between the two areas will be addressed shortly.

The earliest incident reported by a resident happened in 1985 and was caused by settling under the front porch slab 15 years after construction. All other cited incidents occurred between 2011 and 2025, when the impacted homes ranged from 45 to 58 years old. Every home in Orange Hunt Estates is now at least 48 years old.

The number of sewer line blockages or breaks that has happened in Orange Hunt Estates is likely much greater than the 16 reported. First, more than half of the community are not dues paying members and therefore did not get the emailed survey request. Second, some who are members may have chosen to not respond or are

unaware of a previous owner's repair or replacement. It may be reasonable, then, to estimate from the sample that at least twice as many homes have had sewer lateral

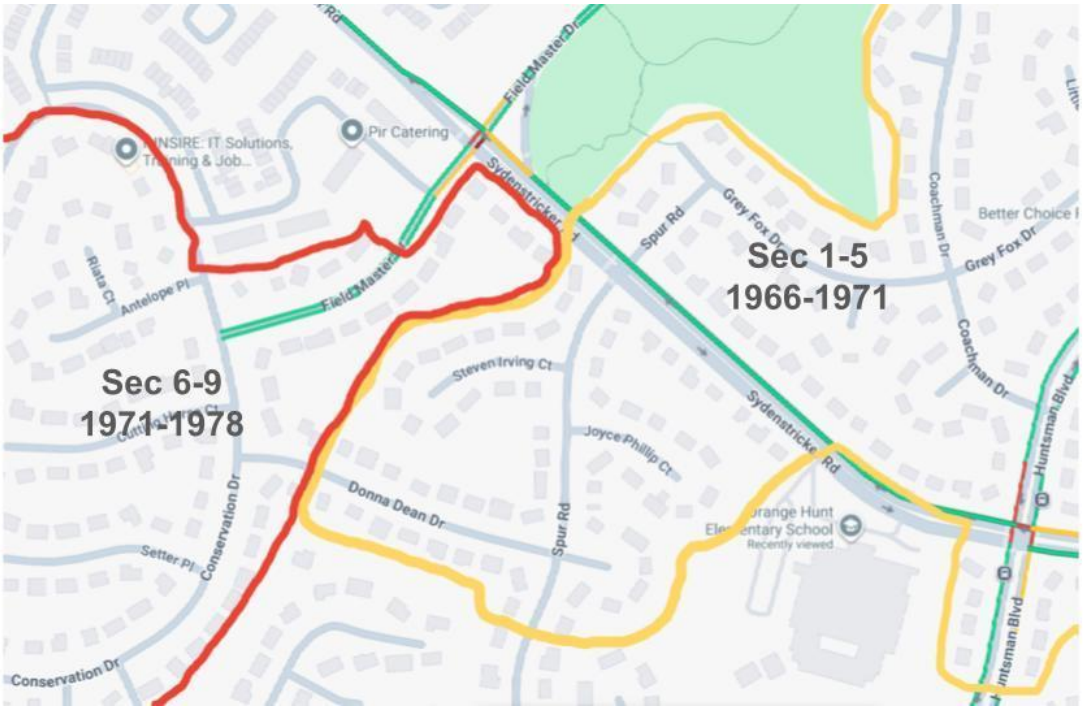


repairs or replacements than reported. That's more than 3 percent of all the homes in Orange Hunt Estates. I'll leave it to you to decide if those are favorable odds. However, consider that this chance of something happening is calculated over the entire community, and the map plots clearly show that incidents are location dependent. I will explain below why I believe this is the case.

In response to my followup request, over 40 OHECA members helped to identify the 4-inch primary interior waste pipe material entering their basement slabs, mostly cast iron or ABS plastic. I theorized that this could be reflective of the type of pipes under the slab and perhaps the nature of the lateral to the street. The modest survey sample allowed me to determine an appatrent pattern.

There appears to be a correlation between the type of main waste pipe, or pipes, originally installed in a basement and the phase of subdivision development. Homes in Orange Hunt Estates built in Sections 1-5, i.e., from 1966 to 1971, have original cast iron main waste pipes, or stacks. There is one reported unexplained anomaly on Spur Rd, where the home's primary basement waste pipe is ABS. The original main waste pipe installations in Sections 5-9, i.e., homes built from 1971 to 1978, are ABS, based on sample member responses..

Our homes were built in a chronological sequence from Old Keene Mill Rd to the north, across Sydenstricker Rd, and ending in the Elk Dr/Sangster School area to the south.The boundary between these two groups of construction phases falls on the south side of Sydenstricker Rd in the area of Spur Rd, Steven Irving Ct, Joyce Phillip Ct, and Donna Dean Dr.(For more information on Orange Hunt Estates construction phases, click community history here.)



Cast iron is sturdy. According to sources, cast iron pipes typically last between 50 and 80 years, but many begin to fail after 40 years due to internal corrosion and environmental stress. (Recall that virtually every reported failure in the older half of our community happened after 45 to 58 years.) More modern ABS and PVC plastic piping is light, durable, and lasts longer, up to a 100 years or more. These are averages, not

guarantees. Soil conditions, water chemistry, installation quality, usage, maintenance and tree roots all play major roles.

I was comfortable concluding that the greater frequency of lateral issues happened in the older sections of the community, because they had cast iron laterals, whereas the newer sections had ABS laterals – so I thought. This was supported by several members in the older sections reporting that they knew their laterals were cast iron because of repairs they had done.

I proceeded with this conclusion through virtually the entirety of my writing this assessment. But, within days of dissemination, my conclusion was seemingly turned on its head by a couple on Field Master Dr, i.e, the newer half of Orange Hunt Estates (1971), who advised me that they just had their lateral preventively inspected by Kinnett Plumbing and were told that the ABS main waste pipe entering the concrete floor transitioned to cast iron under the slab and to the street. However, I still hold a strong possibility that laterals transitioned from cast iron to ABS somewhere south of Sydenstricker Rd. With this element of doubt injected into my assessment, the only way to determine if you have cast iron or ABS sub-basement waste pipes and lateral is to have it inspected.

By the way, the report this couple received indicated there were no clogs, dislocated joints, root intrusions, or bellies in the line. The technician felt the amount of rust and corrosion in the cast iron pipes was a good deal less than what he would have expected given the age of the pipes (55 years). One might posit that the $689 they paid for this peace of mind is worth more than what some claim they get from $12 per month HomeServe sewer line coverage.

SEWER BLOCKAGE SYMPTOMS. There are some universal symptoms that residents experienced that lead to the detection of their sewer lateral clog, break, or backup. They generally involve something happening in the basement, i.e., the lowest point in the home plumbing system. An example is a sewage backup from the HVAC area drain that can spread throughout the basement. Some residents had this happen with devastating results to basement personal effects and structure. A backup in a house without a basement would impact first floor living space and be just as devastating. A couple residents reported basement toilets “gurgling” or backing up when a shower or bath above was used. Slow draining of plumbing fixtures can also be a symptom. Other possible indications of a lateral blockage or break include a foul odor in the basement or yard or a lush green patch in the lawn, indicating leaking sewage water.

It is important to make a distinction between an isolated fixture and a whole-house problem. The former is a sign of a local secondary blockage that generally requires disassembly of a “P” trap, plunging, or snaking. A DIY homeowner or handyman often can perform a fix. However, if there is an issue that appears to be impacting several fixtures, then the problem is more serious, and a plumber needs to be hired to ascertain the cause and solution.

If you find that your neighbors have coincidental issues, that’s an indication of a problem with the county’s sewer main under the street. In that case, call the DPWES Residential Wastewater Management’s 24-hour emergency number, 703-323-1211. I received no reports of this happening in our community, and it seems to be universally infrequent due to the county’s regular maintenance.

CAUSES. A sewer line drainage issue can be an anxiety-laden time for homeowners, particularly when multiple members of a family are impacted. There are many possibilities for a blockage: Snagged foreign material (e.g., “flushable” wipes), grease and other organic waste deposits, tree root intrusion, cracked or broken pipe, foundation settling, shifting ground, pipe deterioration, offset pipe connection, a sagging pipe, or trapped air. Any of these can prevent the free flow of sewage. One plumber I spoke to stated that only a 50 percent blockage can cause a backup. Another plumber noted that most breaks he’s experienced in his business happen near the foundation from settling,

Some blockages can be cleared with motorized or hydro-jet cleaning. However, other resolutions can involve expensive repair or replacement involving outside trenching, trenchless solutions, or basement floor cutting and jackhammering. Furnishings, carpets, and drywall can be ruined when a serious backup happens. It was reported that when one resident had a backup, it brought with it a massive drain fly infestation.There can be some disruption to homelife. Some residents have had to leave their homes for a short period, but most impacted residents have had to contend only with non-use of plumbing for parts of a day or two.

One homeowner on Sydenstricker Rd experienced two or three clogs to a cast iron lateral over 20 years of residency. In 2009, clearing the lateral blockage cost the homeowner $381 (2026 = $580). In 2015, the cost was $455 (2026 = $625) to snake 105 feet of lateral to the street. The snaking revealed an accumulation of a variety of deposits, including hair and dental floss. During a video inspection, the camera operator thought there was a disconnection of the lateral at the county main. The homeowner requested that the county look into this. County personnel did a video inspection from a manhole and provided the homeowner with evidence that there was no connection

issue. This homeowner enrolled in HomeServe, not after her own experiences, but out of concern when a friend in Alexandria needed an entire lateral replaced.

A couple on Dianne Pl experienced two drainage issues a month apart in 2020. A camera inspection the second time revealed that tree roots had invaded the cast iron lateral. The couple opted for a trenchless solution involving a section of cured-in-place pipe (CIPP) lining. They were offered three options by their contractor, Len the Plumber: Repair a 10-foot section using CIPP for almost $7,000, line 60 feet of the lateral for almost $18,000, or make a 100-foot CIPP replacement all the way to the county main for about $21,000. (More on CIPP later.) They chose to have the 10-foot section repaired and had a mature maple tree removed to prevent a possible repeat occurrence of root intrusion. Their repair lining cost in today's dollars would approach $9,000. There was no disruption to their front yard other than the tree removal. They have not had a blockage since.

The 1985 front porch area incident mentioned earlier cost the homeowner $1,500 to perform a spot repair that spliced a plastic replacement section into the broken cast iron lateral. That's more than $4,500 in today's dollars. The same Spur Rd homeowner had a second lateral blockage in 2012. A camera inspection determined that the pipe had cracked and a broken piece had fallen into the pipe. Based on homeowner misgivings with the earlier spot repair and stories he heard about other Orange Hunt Estate sewer repairs, he accepted his contractor's advice concerning the condition of his line and had the entire 8-foot deep, 50-foot lateral replaced with plastic pipe for a cost of $6,700 (2026 = $9,500). The homeowner had no coverage, so bore all costs. He has since signed onto a HomeServe utility warranty. He personally believes the coverage is worth the cost. His USAA insurance only covers backup damage to the interior. During the replacement work, the water line was nicked and had to be repaired. The water line ran near the sewer lateral for about 30 feet. The lateral replacement took three days to complete. The homeowner was very satisfied with his contractor, Kramer & Sons.

A resident on Game Lord Dr experienced what appeared to be an ABS lateral pipe joint displacement in 2022, apparently caused by the pressure of a rock or possibly ground shifting. The rock clearly came from the excavated material during construction that was then used as backfill after pipe installation. This inadvisable practice of using excavated material as backfill in contact with pipe is no longer permitted by code. Fairfax County now requires a bed of approved crushed stone or gravel to provide permanent, uniform support along the entire length of a lateral.

Excavation backfill contributing to a sewage overflow came to light on a larger scale earlier this year with the well publicized collapsed regional Potomac interceptor pipe

running from Dulles Airport to the Blue Plains treatment plant in D.C. Boulders from the original bedrock excavation blasting in Maryland were used as backfill and entered the interceptor pipe after it collapsed. This caused damming of sewage flow and a backup of major proportions.

The camera photo shown here came from the lateral camera video taken by F. H. Furr at the Game Lord Dr home. Long's Corporation did the spot trench repair at a cost of $6,600 (2026 = $8,000+), which was entirely covered by the homeowner's HomeServe warranty. The homeowner was very satisfied with his experience. F. H. Furr did not do the repair, because it is not in HomeServe's contractor network; Long's Corp is. I showed the video to a plumber I interviewed, and he identified the pipe as probably ABS. This identification played into the initial correlation I made between ABS entering the slab and an ABS lateral. It may still prove out that much of the newer sections of the community have ABS laterals, but more firsthand evidence than this one sample is needed.

A couple on Grey Fox Dr learned that the cause of repeated backups was the bowing of a sub-basement waste pipe from foundation settling. This is after cleanings by Roto-Rooter over several years that each cost $1,000 or more.The solution to making a repair just this year required jackhammering a portion of the concrete floor and replacing the bowed section. The work was done by M. E. Flow after their home insurer, Erie Insurance, requested they get more estimates than what Roto-Rooter provided. (Did Erie believe the Roto-Rooter charges were excessive?) Unfortunately, Erie has denied them compensation, apparently for reasons of policy exclusion.

Settling of our homes is not uncommon and has been evident from major cracks or sinking in carport floors, external "step" cracks in brick facing, major inside wall cracks, and porch slab separation from the adjoining home wall. I have a crack in my basement floor that is probably indicative of some settling. Thankfully, it has been stable since move-in 40 years ago and has not impacted waste pipes (to date!).

One OHECA member on Reynard Dr reported that Michael & Sons spot-repaired a 15-foot deep section of cast iron lateral about 6-9 years ago at a cost of about $10,000 (2026 = minimum $12,600).

Some residents who needed trenching to expose the lateral for repair were told that their cast iron pipe was resting on concrete blocks at intervals. Ground settling under the pipe caused undue pressure on the pipe from the feet of soil above. In one of the cases, video showed the pipe had been pushed off a block. The apparent original purpose of the blocks was to hold the pipe in place before backfill to assist workers in installing the lateral at a precise slope for proper sewage flow. It is not known how prevalent this procedure was during construction of other homes.

COSTS. Costs incurred by residents vary considerably, depending on the type and extent of work done. The cost of work a decade or more ago will, of course, have been less than comparable work in today's dollars, but with the inflation calculations arrived at above and the search of online literature, we can arrive at some generalizations.

Clogs in a lateral fixed by snaking or other minimally disruptive lateral blockage removal would generally cost a few thousands of dollars and fall within the HomeServe cap and probably under an optional homeowner policy rider, too. In its mailer, HomeServe states that as of December 2024 the average sewer line replacement cost, presumably across the U.S., was $6,633. Allowing for more than a year of inflation and a higher than average cost of living in Northern Virginia, I estimate that translates to at least $8,000. If challenges surface in the process, the cost could escalate to $10k to $15k, and out-of-pocket costs could kick in. More extensive work, such as jackhammering through a foundation wall and deep trenching from the house to the sidewalk to replace an entire lateral can exceed $10k and perhaps approach $20k, depending on a variety of factors. Trenchless solutions are generally more expensive than trenching approaches but are less disruptive and don’t have the possible landscaping recovery costs.

Each vertical and horizontal foot adds to the cost. Plumbers I talked to told me that the depth of a lateral is generally 8-10 feet. However, one resident reported that the required trenching at his home was 15 feet. During original construction, the depth of the lateral was determined by the difference in elevation between the house and the county main using a standard lateral incline of ¼ inch per foot of pipe to maintain flow. Lateral replacement is less common than spot repair, including either trenching or trenchless solutions.

In the rare case that a section of lateral needs replacement to the connection at the main, the situation requires a special plumbing contractor with the capability and

bonding and licensing needed to coordinate with the county for the main connection and with VDOT for digging up and repaving the street. The cost of such a pipe replacement can soar well in excess of $20k and extend work time considerably. The Kramer & Sons plumber offered that his company is VDOT bonded and licensed and is sometimes subcontracted by a plumbing service which is not. He opined that the cost would be higher in this situation, as the primary contractor gets a cut. Fortunately, no one in our community reported requiring replacement to the main.

MAINTENANCE. There are precautions and maintenance actions that a homeowner can take to minimize chances of a sewer line blockage. As one plumber told me, “The only things that should be flushed down a toilet are “#1, #2, and toilet paper.” Another source added vomit! No so-called “flushable” wipes or paper towels, for example. Another plumber offered that if a homeowner employs maids, be aware of what they may flush during their cleaning efforts.

Experts advise to not put grease and cooking oil down the sink. Freeze as much as possible in an empty can and throw in the trash on pickup day. Wipe as much grease or oil residual from a pan as possible with a paper towel, and throw it in the trash. Minimize what food waste you grind in the garbage disposal. Compost it, or trash it. Install drain filters in baths and showers that collect hair.

For a long-term solution, periodic use of enzyme cleaners in drains naturally digests organic matter collecting in the pipes and is environmentally safe. Enzymes are not effective for sudden removal of a clog. Ironically, the prevailing practice of society now is to use anti-bacterial soaps, which counteracts the action of enzymes. Do not use harsh chemicals as a routine practice. They can damage pipes and cause harm to the environment.

To prevent breeding of drain flies in the organic crud that can accumulate in pipes, make sure you periodically (e.g., once per month) pour water into seldom used drains (e.g., HVAC drains, basement bathrooms) to keep the “P” traps from drying out. There are other remedies to preventatively eliminate their breeding or to attack an infestation. Click here for a website that offers 12 solutions.

Other types of maintenance will need to be accomplished by professionals. Plumbers recommend periodic camera inspection of laterals in older homes, particularly those with cast iron laterals. Because cast iron deteriorates from the inside out, regular video scanning is the only reliable way to assess the pipe’s internal condition before there might be a failure.

I have read plumbing suggestions that a cast iron lateral should be inspected every 3 to 5 years. For homes built before 1975, one source recommends inspections every 1 to 2 years. These can cost several hundreds of dollars and are not covered by homeowner policy endorsements or utility warranties. (More on this later.) Two plumbing services I talked to were in the same ballpark on cost, about $700, which is about what the Field Master Dr couple recently paid.

If you are fortunate like the Field Master couple, your inspecting plumber gives you a good report. However, what starts off as a well-meaning, relatively low cost preventative inspection could turn into a costly affair, if the inspection reveals issues. For instance, does a rusted frozen cast iron clean-out cap lead to an ABS or PVC replacement to facilitate inspections and cleanings at the time and in the future? Kaching! Inspection may reveal that the lateral should be cleaned. Kaching! Two primary processes exist to clean the lateral pipes interior: motorized descaling machine (auger or blading device) and hydro-jetting (pressurized water). If inspection determines that the lateral pipe is too old, cracked, or has already lost structural integrity, repair or replacement may be necessary. Kaching! Again, none of this may be covered by a policy you have.
Does the adage “out-of-sight, out-of-mind” rule your decision making for financial reasons until the worst might happen, or do you “bite the bullet” to possibly have to take costly preventive measures now before a blockage and backup could happen later?

What may be a ticking cast iron lateral time bomb could be ready to explode after an unknowing buyer moves into our community. One resident said that after buying a

house on Sydenstricker Rd two years ago, he began experiencing multiple backups through the floor drain in the basement. A plumber scoped the lateral with a camera and observed a significant accumulation of crud lining the cast iron pipe. The homeowner had it cleaned and a cleanout installed in the yard to facilitate future cleaning. Did the previous owner(s) experience backups and intentionally not reveal it, or did they truly believe that they had solved the problem with a cleaning they may have done? The intent is impossible to determine in this case. The following case, however, hints that the seller may not have been innocent.

In 2017, prospective Orange Hunt Estates homeowners proactively had a Sydenstricker Rd home's lateral scoped as a contingency for purchase. The verdict was all clear, but six days after moving in they experienced a devastating backup. They recalled the Roto-Rooter contractor to inspect the line again, and this time he found a break admittedly missed during the first inspection. Eventual repair required basement jackhammering and extensive front yard trenching to fix. The new homeowners footed an $11K (2026 = $14,600) contractor bill, plus what it cost them to return their finished basement to normal. Roto-Rooter's refund of the $450 camera inspection was little consolation.

Did the previous owner know there was a problem not revealed at the time of sale? It seems so. The home was a rental property, and the new owners later learned that a renter occasionally requested to use a friendly neighbor's shower because of drainage issues in the rental property. It would seem logical that this problem was reported to the landlord at some point, and that the owner knew before the sale.

It would appear, also, from this experience that a camera inspection may not be foolproof, and the reading of a scoping camera's video may depend on the skill and experience of the operating technician. Recall another camera technician's mistaken conclusion that there was a lateral disconnect at the county main.

ABS laterals do not require the same rigorous inspection schedule as cast iron, because they are non-corroding and long lasting. Their smooth interior minimizes sludge buildup. However, just like cast iron, they can be prone to tree root intrusion, joint separation, and human flushing of improper objects. A single inspection may be all that is needed to offer peace of mind for a long duration, perhaps even the life of ownership.

WARRANTIES AND INSURANCE. What about sewer pipe warranties, like HomeServe? Reviews from a range of sources seem mixed. Five of the community members who responded to the survey carry HomeServe, and two have had the opportunity to use the coverage for their lateral blockages. One was very satisfied with

the outcome, and the other, while feeling that the warranty more than paid for itself, had some criticisms that paralleled comments from an in-service vendor, Long's Corporation, during my interview with its plumber. The following paraphrases their comments for comparison:

Homeowner: After considerable snaking, the work crew removed an unidentified blockage causing a basement backup. They didn't use a camera, which could have provided better diagnostics. According to the crew, the camera was broken. A crewmember commented that it wouldn't surprise him if the sewer pipe was damaged. They said in order to replace the exterior sewer line, we would need to have one more flood. Requiring a second incident is nerve wracking. Fortunately, we have not had any more issues. (This homeowner enrolled in HomeServe coverage before the incident after learning of a neighbor's sewer backup.)

Plumber: I have to seek authorization from HomeServe for every step of the service call process, and it is strict about what it will allow to be done. There needs to be three incidents before HomeServe will authorize camera diagnostics, and it won't authorize a repair until there is a backup. HomeServe offers different sewer policies, and homeowners must be diligent about reading the fine print in each. When calling HomeServe about a problem, say as little as possible, because your words can be detrimental to what's covered. Let the plumber do the talking onsite.

One can find a broader sampling of warranty companies with online searches. Home Shield, for example, is another warranty company that widely advertises. This site provides access to several rating platforms that compares HomeServe to several competitors, although the ratings are not always sewer line specific but rather ratings of the warranty companies writ large. On the other hand, Marketwatch did review specifically sewer line coverage of 27 warranty companies and picked the best. (HomeServe was not reviewed.)

A 2020 analysis by Consumers' Checkbook concluded that even if you own a house for decades, your odds of having a catastrophic water or sewer line failure are quite low, less than 0.7 percent in several major cities it analyzed. Checkbook's access to records of the Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission indicated a water and sewer line incidence of 1.4 percent over a 2 ½ year period when the WSSC partnered with HomeShield.

Although our Orange Hunt Estates sample was too small to be statistically rigid, you will recall that my "back-of-the-envelope" calculation earlier also concluded low odds overall of a general sewer line failure in our community. However, the older Orange Hunt

Estate homes with original cast iron laterals are the most in danger of failure by a considerable margin. If you determine that your lateral pipe is made of ABS plastic, your odds are much better of not having a failure. The question is to what degree are you willing to play the odds? One resident wrote to me, “If you never need the repair over a 40-year period, those few dollars a month (for HomeShield) are still worth the peace of mind you get from having the insurance.”

Some sources recommend that a sewer line endorsement to a standard homeowner’s policy is generally the best and most cost-effective way to protect against a sewer line break. According to sources, $10k-$20k coverage can be had for an additional $30-$90 annually to a standard policy, but check with your carrier. Furthermore, protection to replace ruined belongings and restore other internal damage from a sewer backup can be obtained with an additional endorsement, if not already part of the homeowner’s policy. For example, I found that my Travellers policy does include backup damage coverage with a $5,000 limit, but it does not offer a pipe repair or replacement endorsement. One plumber I talked to has a rider to his personal Progressive policy that gives him a coverage cap of $25k for a few hundred dollars more annually. Other insurance companies that reportedly offer these coverages include Safeco, Liberty Mutual, State Farm, American Family Insurance, and GEICO.

As a sampling, I wrote to three insurance agencies to inquire about sewer line endorsements with Progressive, Nationwide, and State Farm policies. One responded asking the age of my home, which I provided. No one followed through more than that. I may have made the mistake of including that I was interested in comparing their quotes to HomeServe, but not interested in a policy, which I, in fact, was. You should get better service with sewer rider questions, if you already have a policy with the carrier.

More than once In my research, sources cautioned to read the fine print in your HomeServe or other utility warranty coverage. For instance, if peace of mind means you want a camera inspection or cleaning before a problem surfaces, know that HomeServe’s terms and conditions generally do not cover preventative measures, if there is no immediate operational failure. The same applies to a standard homeowner’s policy sewer line rider regarding non-coverage of preventative measures. I attempted to find HomeServe details on terms and conditions. A phone call to a HomeServe agent directed me to its website, but I saw nothing there that added to information in the Dominion Energy mailers. So, I don’t know if expanded details exist, or if they are perhaps available only after enrolling.

Here are some comparisons between HomeServe and a homeowner's insurance rider that I have gleaned from the information I gathered. You are responsible for determining how they may apply to your situation:
:

- HomeServe has no service fee. A homeowner's policy will have a deductible.
- HomeServe picks the contractor for you. A homeowner's policy allows you to pick the contractor, perhaps with the carrier's pre-approval.
- HomeServe may be somewhat restrictive on what it allows the plumber to do to solve a problem. Your homeowner's policy may be more liberal.
- HomeServe's $10k sewer line coverage costs $5.99 per month, or $71.88 annually. (Based on my Dominion Energy mailer received on April 7, 2026.) You may be able to buy a higher cap for repair or replacement costs with a rider to your homeowner's policy, but for a higher premium.
- HomeServe coverage applies to the lateral from the exterior wall of the home to the county main. It's not clear to me if HomeServe's interior plumbing and drainage system coverage applies to the sub-basement pipes connecting to the lateral. You would have to check with your carrier to determine if this coverage is available with a rider.
- HomeServe appears not to question the age of the home. Your homeowner's policy may consider age and if cast iron pipes are involved.

A homeowner's policy may not be foolproof. Each claim, including for sewer line repair, adds to your home insurance claim history. Too many claims over a period of time may cause policy cancellation. This happened to one homeowner. The couple with the recent repair of the bowed pipe section under their basement was denied coverage by their Erie Insurance carrier, even with their $10,000 sewer line endorsement, because the blockage was not caused by tree roots or a broken pipe.

The best advice is for you to inquire about terms and conditions before you commit to a sewer line rider on your homeowner's policy or a utility warranty like HomeServe.

REPAIR SOLUTIONS. Plumbers can clear many lateral clogs with a power-driven long snake with an attachment head. A variety of cleaning attachments are available to the plumber depending on the nature of the clog. Click the following for video examples of clearing flushable wipes, tree roots, and cast iron internal corrosion. However, if a blockage is caused by a compromised pipe, other more involved options have to be considered.

Some options for fixing lateral damage have been alluded to in the discussions above. Fundamentally, they involve two categories: trench and trenchless solutions. Trenchless

is somewhat of a misnomer, because one or two pits often need to be dug near the house or sidewalk to pull or push a new pipe or liner repair section or complete pipe replacement. Here are some details on these options:

- Trenching: When snake attachment cleaning of a clogged lateral is not a solution, digging may be required to expose a section of damaged pipe for repair. With one exception, association members who responded to the survey had plumbing contractors who dug trenches to expose a damaged pipe. Trenching can be isolated to the area of the problem to allow a replacement section of pipe. Trenching can be thought of as the traditional way to repair a damaged lateral. Pipe replacement is necessary for pipes with severe collapses, extensive deterioration, or complete blockages and requires considerable digging. One resident described a 3 feet wide, 8 feet deep, 50 feet long trench across his yard to replace the lateral.

- Pipe bursting: A seamless high density polyethylene pipe with a stainless steel cone head attached is pulled through the existing pipe. The cone is slightly bigger in diameter than the existing pipe, so it breaks apart (bursts) the old pipe and leaves in its place the new pipe. It was originally used to replace fragile Orangeburg pipe used in the 1940s, ‘50s, and ‘60s, but is now used to burst old cast iron sewer pipes reaching their end of life. However, if the cast iron line is not sufficiently straight, bursting cannot be done. This video is a simplified demonstration of the process.

- Pipe lining: A fabric liner material is soaked in epoxy and pulled or forced through the old pipe. It is expanded in the pipe by different methods and allowed to cure in place over several hours (i.e., cured-in-place-piping, or CIPP). One new method is cured-in-place pipe lining made of fiberglass reinforced resin that expedites the hardening time using UV light. (Been to the dentist lately for a filling? Same process.) Spot repairs can be done with pipe liners, as in the case of the homeowners on Dianne Pl mentioned a while back. This YouTube video addresses the CIPP process.
- Pipe coating: This spin cast process coats the existing pipe with liquid epoxy. This video shows the epoxy spraying process.

This YouTube video is an excellent review of all the trenchless methods. This video compares the lining and coating trenchless processes, with particular application to cast iron pipes.

You will notice in many of the videos that plumbers utilize outside clean-outs to provide easy access to the lateral. Unfortunately, when our homes were built, external clean-outs were not required by code. This video is informative about the function of external cleanouts. Alternative, less easy access to the lateral is via a basement or utility room cleanout. In the case of a rusted cast iron clean-out cap, the next option is removal of a basement or ground floor toilet for access through its waste pipe, which is sufficiently large to feed snake cleaning attachments. The Dianne Pl couple did report that a spot repair liner was accessed through the utility floor drain, apparently because no large pipe diameter requirement was needed to feed the flexible liner material. Per the county permitting and inspection process, some property owners have had external cleanouts installed in conjunction with trenching needed to repair or replace a lateral pipe.

So far, I have mostly focused on the outside laterals or a spot repair under the slab. Suppose an entire network of deteriorated cast iron waste pipes under a slab needs replacing? Here are solutions from two different plumbing services elsewhere in the country to do this. Both require extensive digging under and outside the slab.

In one case in the Dallas area, the contractor dug an extensive array of tunnels to access all the pipes. One tunnel was 6 feet long! See the video here.

In a second case, also in the greater Dallas area, the contractor chose to reroute the under-slab waste pipes to exterior trenches to avoid breaking through the slab in the living areas or tunneling, as in the first example. See the video here.

I won't even guess what these two jobs would cost!

PLUMBING CONTRACTORS. Several plumbing contractors have been cited above in conjunction with reported homeowner experiences. Links to them are listed below, along with some other contractors I found with online searches. Some have noteworthy sewer line specialties listed on their websites, which I note.

Participating residents who have hired their own contractors have used Roto-Rooter, Kramer & Sons, Sparkle Sewer and Drain Cleaning, F. H. Furr, E.M. Flow, Len the Plumber, Michael and Son, and Kinnett Plumbing with satisfaction, except in the case of one Roto-Rooter experience described below. Residents with HomeServe warranties were sent the plumbing services Kramer & Sons and Long's Corp. There are many other contractor options, and some of those are listed later. Likewise there are other warranty providers for sewer line coverage besides HomeServe, and links have already been provided to research them.

HomeServe partners with a network of plumbing contractors, but I could not identify them, with the exception of Kramer & Sons and Long's Corp mentioned by residents with HomeServe warranties. A Michael & Son employee told me that his company does not partner with HomeServe. In most cases reported to me by residents, the homeowner did not have a HomeServe warranty or homeowner's insurance rider and contracted a plumbing service on their own.

All Plumbing (Sewer and water main specialist)
Caffi Services
F.H. Furr (hydro-jetting)
Home Service Pros (Cast-in-place pipe; hydro-jetting))
Hydroforce Plumbing and Drain Services (Cast iron pipe descaling; hydro-jetting)
Interstate Plumbing Services (Trenchless sewer and water line repair and replacement)
Kinnett Plumbing (Hydrojetting; trenchless repairs)
Kramer & Sons
Len The Plumber (Trenchless solutions)
Long's Corporation
M E Flow
Michael & Son (Starting prices: hydrojetting $700; Repairs $6,800; Replacements $6,500)
Nova Lining (Cured-in-place pipe lining; high pressure air digging and soil vacuuming)
Roto-Rooter (Water damage cleanup)
Sparkle Sewer and Drain Cleaning
Syd's Plumbing & Repairs (Trenchless technology)
The Diggy Diggy Hole Company (Underground plumbing services)
The Plumbing Doctor
Veteran Plumbing Services (Website offers copious details on addressing Orangeburg sewer line problems, but much is very applicable to our cast iron and ABS lines.)

I wrote to several of these companies requesting an interview to discuss details of their experiences dealing with sewer lateral issues. Only two replied, and they granted me a meeting: Michael & Son and Long's Corporation. I had long conversations with representatives from both vendors, and they were extremely cooperative and informative. Most plumber citations I make in this analysis come from those representatives.

If you are interested in researching the bona fides of any contractor, I found three useful resources: The Virginia Department of Professional and Occupational Regulation (DPOR). Consumer's Checkbook (plumbers), and the Better Business Bureau (plumber). All provide a company look-up option at the links I provide.

DPOR issues professional credentials—licenses, certificates or registrations and enforces standards of professional conduct. DPOR divides contractor licenses into three classes (A, B, and C) based on monetary limits per project and annual revenue.

- Class A: No limit on project value; requires 5 years experience and $45,000 net worth.
- Class B: Individual projects under $120,000 (up to $750,000 annually); requires 3 years experience and $15,000 net worth.
- Class C: Individual projects under $10,000 (up to $150,000 annually); requires 2 years experience.

Almost all in the list above have a Class A license.

Without a personal subscription, the Consumer Checkbook site linked above offers some superficial ratings information based on consumer experiences. Fairfax county libraries provide free access to Checkbook, allowing you deeper dives into ratings, reviews, and price research.

The BBB rates businesses from A+ to F focused on complaint history, business practices, and transparency. Ratings weigh heavily on how companies respond to, resolve, and manage customer disputes rather than just the raw number of complaints. Almost all the vendors cited above have an A+ rating.

CONCLUSIONS:

- Cast iron laterals have a higher risk of failure than ABS laterals.
- Cast iron laterals are original to at least the oldest sections of Orange Hunt Estates. ABS laterals seem to be original to the newer homes in the community.
- Preventative sewer pipe inspections are recommended, particularly for cast iron pipes, but are not covered by utility warranties or homeowner's policies.
- Whether to enroll in HomeServe or a similar warranty company, obtain a homeowner's policy rider, or possibly both, is a personal choice based on many variables: type of lateral, age of home, coverage cost, personal finances, risk acceptance, and the level of peace of mind required.

- Read the fine print for any coverage, so you don't waste money assuming coverage that doesn't exist.
- Some actions you consider may be the best in the long term for sewer line durability, but require painful self funding in the short term.
- If you are self insuring or using your homeowner's policy, know who your top plumber choices will be in advance to save valuable time in an emergency.

MY FINAL THOUGHT: It would seem prudent for most of us to have our sewer line camera inspected to determine the kind of pipe and its condition. What each of us decides to do from that point will depend on the inspection report and how we view the many variables cited in the preceding pages. Good luck, everyone.