



Private Side Sewer Inspections for Sources of Inflow & Infiltration

Frequently Asked Questions

As of Oct. 1, 2010, Tacoma property owners are required to have a certified inspection of their private side sewers and other sources of inflow and infiltration prior to **the sale or transfer of a home or business, major remodel or any construction over an existing side sewer**. This requirement is detailed in Tacoma Municipal Code 12.08.720.

ABOUT THE PROGRAM

Q. Why does the City care about the condition of my side sewer?

The City of Tacoma's side sewer inspection requirements are part of Wastewater Management's Inflow & Infiltration Removal Program. The program is designed to:

- **Eliminate backups of sewage into homes, businesses and streets** caused by surface water (rainwater) and groundwater getting into the wastewater collection system through breaks and cracks in the City mains or private side sewers, or from direct surface water connections such as roof drains, basement sump pumps, floor drains, etc.
- **Eliminate overflows of partially treated wastewater into Commencement Bay.** When inflow and infiltration inundate the wastewater collection system in storm events, the treatment plants are unable to fully treat the wastewater resulting in overflows to the bay.
- **Eliminate sources of sewage leaking into the ground from broken side sewers**, which can be a public health issue.
- **Avoid using the treatment plant for treating clean groundwater and rainwater**, which is expensive and unnecessary.
- **Make property owners aware of the condition of their side sewer.** As with onsite septic systems, side sewer maintenance is the responsibility of the property owner. Knowing the condition of a building's side sewer means that property owners can better plan and prepare for repairs or replacements just as they would for roofs, furnaces, and other major working systems of the building rather than discovering the problem when the sewer suddenly backs up into the building.

A BRIEF GLOSSARY

Side sewer: Also known as a lateral or private connection, the side sewer carries waste from a home or business' toilets and drains to the City's main sewer line, where it continues to a wastewater treatment plant. Property owners are responsible for maintaining and repairing the side sewer.

Inflow: Rainwater that gets into the wastewater system through direct connections such as roof drains, basement sump pumps and floor drains.

Infiltration: Groundwater that gets into the wastewater system through cracks or breaks in the City main or private side sewer.

FOR MORE INFO

City of Tacoma
Environmental Services
Science & Engineering Division
(253) 591-5588
[www.cityoftacoma.org/
sewerinspection](http://www.cityoftacoma.org/sewerinspection)

Q. Why is rainwater and groundwater getting into our wastewater system a problem?

The City of Tacoma has a separated sewer system. The wastewater system collects water that leaves homes and businesses through sinks, showers and toilets. It flows through sewer pipes to a wastewater treatment plant where it is treated before being released into Commencement Bay. The stormwater system collects water that runs off of our streets, roofs, yards and driveways. It then flows through catch basins, storm sewer pipes, pump stations and/or detention ponds and flows directly -- untreated -- into lakes, streams, rivers, Commencement Bay and Puget Sound.

During heavy rains, stormwater getting into the wastewater system can cause “peak flows” that can be as much as seven times the normal flow in the system. This can overwhelm the City’s wastewater sewers and treatment facilities, resulting in untreated or partially treated wastewater overflowing into basements, streets or Commencement Bay.

Q: When am I required to get a Certificate of Inspection for my side sewer?

A Certificate of Inspection for private side sewer inspections and sources of inflow and infiltration is required in the following circumstances:

- **If a property is being sold**, the certificate must be obtained prior to the close of escrow. The City of Tacoma requires an inspection and disclosure of the findings only. Any repair work is at the discretion of the buyer and seller; it is not required for certification. Condos and certain title transfers are exempt from this requirement. See TMC 12.08.720 for details.
- **If a planned remodeling project exceeds 60 percent of the value of the original building**, the property owner must have a Certificate of Inspection on file with the City before a building permit will be issued.
- **If any new buildings or additions to existing buildings will be constructed over the top of an existing private side sewer**, the property owner must have a certificate on file with the City before a building permit will be issued. If the location of a private side sewer is unknown, it will need to be located before the City will issue a building permit.

Q. How long is a Certificate of Inspection good for?

Five years from the date of inspection.

Q. Who does the inspection? What’s required?

Hire a licensed plumber or licensed side sewer contractor to inspect the private side sewer and look for any sources of inflow and infiltration as well as damage to the pipe. Inspection requirements include:

1. **Video Inspection.** All private side sewers need an internal video inspection for the full length of the private side sewer (from the building to the public sewer main). *Please refer to the inspection requirements form for details on what needs to be submitted.*
2. **Direct Connection Inspection.** All buildings connected to the public sewer main need to be inspected to determine if there are any direct stormwater connections to the sanitary sewer. This could include roof drains, sump pumps, area drains, foundation/footing drains, and yard drains.

Q. What if my sewer is brand new?

A property is exempt from a video inspection if permit records show that a home has a side sewer made of water-tight materials, such as PVC, from the building drain to the City sewer main. Property owners are still required to have an inspection for sources of inflow to obtain a Certificate of Inspection.

Q. How much should I expect to pay for an inspection?

The cost of an inspection can vary depending on the length of the side sewer and how easy or difficult it is to access the side sewer. An average side sewer inspection costs \$200 to \$400. Costs may vary greatly from one company to the next. We recommend that property owners contact at least three companies for written bids before selecting the contractor. Property owners may also check with the Better Business Bureau at (206) 431-2222 to find reputable companies.

Q. What is the penalty for not complying with these requirements prior to the sale of a property?

The City will routinely compare property sales records in the City of Tacoma with the submitted inspection reports to determine which properties are not in compliance. All properties found not to have complied with TMC 12.08.720 may be subject to penalties as stated in TMC 12.08.720F, which includes a Notice of Violation, issuance of corrective order, and civil penalties.

Q. What happens after the inspection is done?

The contractor will provide a copy of the inspection report and video to the City of Tacoma. The City will issue a Certificate of Inspection for any property having a complete and thorough inspection. Copies of the report will be kept on file by the City for future reference.

Q. Where will I (or my contractor) submit my inspection report and video?

The inspection report and video should be submitted to City of Tacoma Environmental Services, located in the Center for Urban Waters at 326 East D St., Tacoma, WA 98421.

Q. How quickly will the City review my inspection report once it is turned in to the City?

The City will review inspection reports within five business days of receiving a completed report at the Center for Urban Waters building. A Certificate of Inspection will be issued for inspections meeting the standards and requirements set forth by the City. If an inspection report does not meet the standards and requirements identified, the property owner will be notified of deficiencies with a request for a revised inspection report and/or video. The City will review the revised inspection report within five business days of receiving the revised report at the Center for Urban Waters building.

Q. How can I check whether a Certificate of Inspection is on file with the City so I can go ahead with my home sale and/or project?

The City began issuing Certificates of Inspection on July 1, 2010, for property owners who are voluntarily complying with this program prior to its effective date of Oct.1, 2010. You may contact Environmental Services at 591-5588 to see if the City has a Certificate of Inspection on file for a property.

Q. OK, so I got the inspection, my side sewer is certified. What now?

The City of Tacoma requires the inspection of side sewers in the above-mentioned circumstances so the property owner (and potential buyer in the case of home sales) is fully aware of the condition of the side sewer. Repair or replacement is at the discretion of the property owner (or may be negotiated between buyer and seller in the event of a sale).

IF THERE IS A PROBLEM

Q. The inspection showed some cracks/breaks/roots, but the sewer line has been working. Why should I fix it if it's not required?

A side sewer with cracks or breaks can more easily become blocked by dirt, rocks or root clusters. A blocked side sewer line can back sewage up into a building and potentially cause property damage. Being aware of the condition of your side sewer means that property owners can be proactive with planned maintenance and repairs rather than being surprised with a big mess and a hefty repair bill. Property owners are responsible for the repair and maintenance of their side sewer.

Q. OK, so I'm going to fix it. Who do I call?

Companies offer a full range of services, including unblocking, repairing and replacing side sewers, but some specialize in certain areas. Make sure to ask which services are provided. Ask friends and relatives for recommendations. Property owners may also check with the Better Business Bureau at (206) 431-2222 to find reputable companies.

All repairs performed in the City right-of-way, even if they're on part of the private side sewer system, must be done by a contractor licensed and bonded to work in Tacoma. *(Please note: Permits are always required, on both private property and in the right-of-way, when performing repair work on side sewers or plumbing fixture. Permits are not required for root removal or unclogging services.)*

Companies can be found listed in the local telephone directory under "Sewer Contractors." Since companies offer a wide range of prices, it's a good idea to get at least three written bids before choosing a company.

- **Rooter services** unclog plumbing and private side sewers using water pressure or mechanical "snakes." Make sure the roofer service's snake cable is long enough to reach from a property's side sewer to the City's main sewer line (typically underneath the street or alley). Rooter companies also might repair and/or replace side sewers.
- **Side sewer contractors** repair and/or replace structural problems, such as breaks or holes, in side sewers. Some contractors also might unclog lines.
- **Plumbers** repair leaky or broken fixtures, and they install systems in new construction and remodeling. If only some fixtures are not draining, or if pipes are leaking, a plumber might be able to remedy the problem.

Q. Can I fix the problem myself?

All repairs performed in the City right-of-way, even if they're on the property owner's private side sewer system, must be done by a contractor licensed and bonded to work in Tacoma. If the property owner chooses to unclog the side sewer or make repairs to portions of the side sewer located only on private property, please keep the following in mind:

- **Unclogging a line:** A variety of tools and products can be found at local home improvement stores. Portable roofer machines are available at many rental companies. Make sure to measure the distance between the side sewer and the main line to determine what size machine to rent.
- **Repairing or replacing a broken or leaky side sewer line:** Property owners may work on their own private sewer system if repairs are located only on private property and not in the right-of-way, but a permit must be obtained from the Public Works Department so construction inspectors can inspect work and ensure it

meets City standards. Permits are available 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday at Public Works Building & Land Use Services, 747 Market St., Room 345, Tacoma, WA 98402. For more information about permit requirements or how to apply, call (253) 591-5030.

(Please note: Permits are always required, on both private property and in the right-of-way, when performing repair work on side sewers or plumbing fixture. Permits are not required for root removal or unclogging services.)

Q. What if my side sewer looks great, but I have a source of inflow (such as a sump pump, roof drains, or floor drain) that is connected to my side sewer? Do I have to fix it?

Repairs are not mandated, but are encouraged. Properly directed stormwater keeps clean water out of the sanitary sewer, which allows more room for the sewage that belongs in the wastewater system, and reduces the City's costs for treating any clean water that is mixed in with the wastewater. For guidance in determining how you could redirect clean water sources to the street or infiltrate (soak in) on site, call Environmental Services at (253) 591-5588.

Q. What if I can't afford to replace or fix my side sewer?

The City offers low-interest sewer loans to qualified homeowners and business owners for side sewer repair or replacement. For information or how to apply for the Sewer Conservation Loan, call (253) 591-5588.

Low-income households can also inquire into the City's Major Home Repair Program, which offers no-interest loans for qualified homeowners within a certain income level. For questions about this program, call (253) 591-5236.

ABOUT YOUR SIDE SEWER

Q. What is a private side sewer?

The side sewer, also known as a lateral sewer or private connection, carries waste from a home or business's toilets and drains to the City's main sewer line, where it continues to a wastewater treatment plant. Property owners are responsible for maintaining and repairing any problems that occur in the side sewer line serving the property.

Q. How do I know where my side sewer is located?

To find the location of a home or business' side sewer, check building plans, ask the previous owner, or look for cleanouts in the yard or landscaping. You can also check permit records kept by Building & Land Use Services by calling (253) 591-5030. (The City has more information about homes built after 1950, and has records only of work done with permits.)

Q. What is a cleanout, and how do I find it?

A cleanout is a pipe that extends vertically from a side sewer to the ground surface or close to the ground surface that is used for access to clean and inspect a side sewer. Most cleanouts are located within 2 feet from the building where the side sewer comes out or at the right-of-way line. Most are covered with a plastic or metal lid, but sometimes there is just a 4- to 6-inch pipe extending out of the ground with a screw on cap. Not every property has a cleanout. If you can't locate your cleanout, you can check permit records kept by Building and Land Use Services by calling (253) 591-5030 or checking www.cityoftacoma.org/mygovme. (The City has more information about homes built after 1950, and has records only of work done with permits.)

Q. What are common problems associated with side sewers?

Most homes in Tacoma were built before 1950, and the original side sewers have rarely been replaced. Over time, these pipes, generally made of clay or concrete, can crack, shift out of place, and/or be subjected to intrusion by roots, all of which can cause leakage and blockage. In addition, some side sewers lack the right kind of cleanouts, which provides access for clearing blockages.

Q. Who is responsible for the maintenance of the side sewers?

The maintenance of the side sewer, up to the connection to the City main, is the responsibility of the private property owner. The City's responsibility is the maintenance of the sewer main, including the tee (T), wyes (Y), and risers at the main.

Q. At what point(s) am I required to repair or replace my sewer lateral?

If a property's side sewer problem gets to the point where sewage won't flow at all and backs up into a building, yard or elsewhere outside the plumbing system, it is considered a Sanitary Sewer Overflow, which is illegal and a health hazard. If this happens, the City notifies the property owner and gives a fixed amount of time to make repairs. In the event that repairs aren't made in the time provided, the property owner may face fines or water shut-off by the health department.

July 2, 2010