

# Caught With Your Pants Down!

**M**any times over the years I've heard the expression, "Caught with your pants down!" So what's this mean? If you are caught with your pants down, you are exposed in an embarrassing situation. It can also mean that you were caught unprepared for a situation or an event.

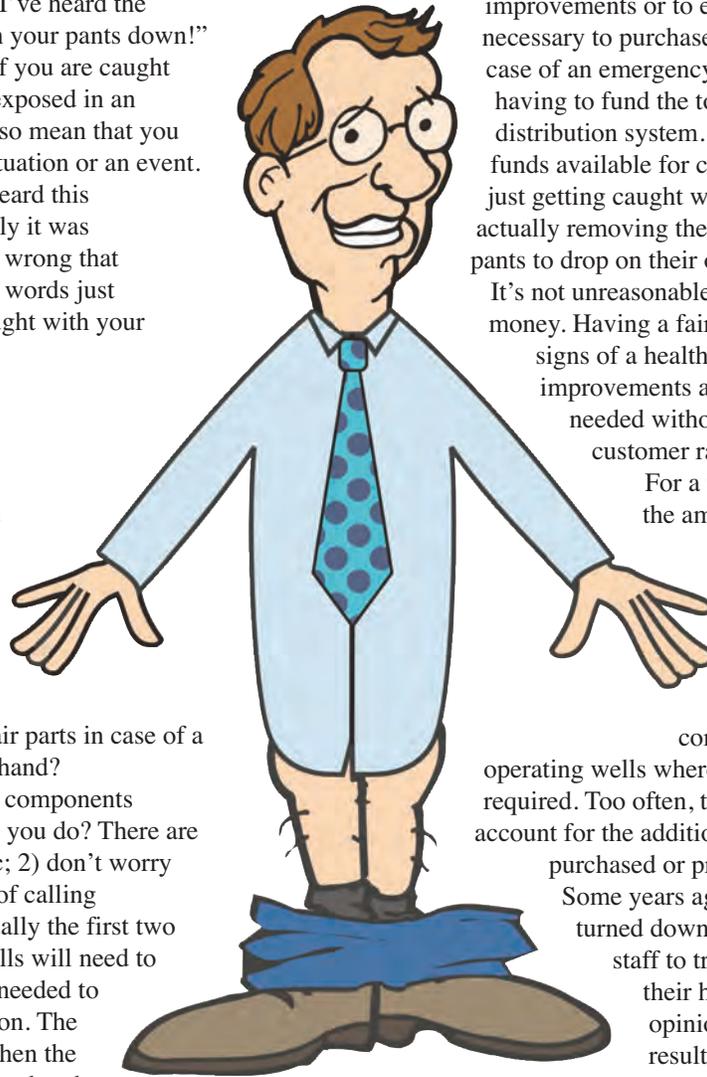
I'm sure many readers have heard this idiom – and many others. Usually it was stated after something had gone wrong that could have been prevented. The words just come off the tongue – "got caught with your pants down, didn't you?"

Water and wastewater system employees can have that sort of experience. Think about it for a minute. What has happened to you or your system that caught you with your pants down? Was it not having spare parts for the chlorinator or even a spare chlorinator to repair or replace the one presently in use? How about the lack of repair parts in case of a line break or no spare pump on hand?

If you do not have the critical components available when needed, what do you do? There are generally three options: 1) panic; 2) don't worry about it; or, 3) start the process of calling companies for spare parts? Actually the first two are not viable options. Phone calls will need to be made to find the component needed to get the system back into operation. The problem really is exacerbated when the problem occurs at night or the weekend when it is very difficult to find the business open or even anyone to answer the phone. Face it, you just got caught with your pants down.

Here's another episode that can happen to water and wastewater systems. Adjusting rates can be very onerous for decision makers. If it isn't, it sure seems to be. Everyone wants to have rates as cheap as possible. However, this may lead to financial disaster. However unpopular, rate adjustments are often necessary

Water and wastewater utilities need to be operated as businesses. That means, revenue in some form needs to exceed expenses. Too often the rates are kept at the lowest possible amount without regard to setting aside funds for



improvements or to even have the cash necessary to purchase the critical components in case of an emergency. Get over any idea of having to fund the total replacement of the distribution system. However, not having funds available for critical components is not just getting caught with your pants down, it's actually removing the belt and allowing your pants to drop on their own.

It's not unreasonable for utilities to make money. Having a fair and reasonable rate shows signs of a healthy utility and allows for improvements and repairs to be made as needed without major impacts on customer rates.

For a water system, controlling the amount of unaccounted for water keeps a system from being caught with their pants down. Systems that purchase water have a much greater financial loss compared to a system operating wells where chlorination is only required. Too often, the customer rates do not account for the additional cost of water that is purchased or produced and then lost.

Some years ago, one Kansas community turned down "free help" by KRWA staff to try to locate and correct their high water loss. The opinion was that doing so would result in potential reduction in scoring for grant funds. That's like letting your finger bleed until you need a transfusion.

So no matter who or what rattles your cage, spins your crank, bursts your bubble or grinds your gears, do what you can to be prepared and do not "Get Caught With Your Pants Down!"

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