

My TWO Cents!



It's Time to Pay Up for Operators

In the November 2019 issue of *The Kansas Lifeline*, I wrote about challenges and issues small towns and communities face when trying to get an employee certified as a water or wastewater operator. In that article I identified the difficulty that many operators are experiencing in taking and passing the certification exam as one of two primary areas of concern for this issue.

In Kansas the operator certification program is managed by Kansas Department of Health and Environment (KDHE). The operator certification exam was developed and is administered by KDHE. In this article I will discuss what I believe is the second of the two primary areas of concern for the future of certified water and wastewater operators in Kansas that does not have to do with the certification exam. It's low wages!

Prior to writing this article I reviewed my previous article. In sections of the that article, it seems I was predicting doomsday for operators who are trying to take and pass a KDHE operator certification exam. My intentions were, and still are, quite the opposite. I meant for the comments to be a "confidence repair kit" for the men and women who put their time in preparing to take a KDHE water or wastewater operator certification exam and were not successful. I wanted them to know that they were not alone. In one operator certification exam, 87 percent of exam-takers were not alone!

A new set of challenges face the small town, community or water district that has

The challenge is for the town, community or water district to maintain the certified operator as an employee.

an employee who passes the exam, or the city or system that hires a certified operator. The challenge is for the town, community or water district to maintain the certified operator as an employee.

The challenge to maintain the certified employee can be almost 100 percent contingent on providing a living wage or the lack thereof. I am often asked by

water and wastewater operators what an appropriate wage or salary for a certified operator or even a contract operator may be. Before I respond with my standard answer, KRWA has put together operator pay ranges through polls and surveys with minimal luck in obtaining responses. Most recently in 2019 a wage survey was conducted for the KRWA Apprenticeship Program. That survey also received minimal response to the request for wage rates.

Wage Rates for Water and Wastewater Operators in Kansas

During three days of training sessions in December 2019 I took a poll of the training class attendees who were willing to volunteer their wage and operator certification class. After reviewing the wage data sets available including the polls from the three-day training sessions, the only consistent part of the wage data sets is that the wages vary greatly throughout all classifications in both water and wastewater per hour.

The following are generalized ranges from a combination of data sets.

Class 1 water	\$12 - \$23	Class 1 wastewater	\$13 - \$25
Class 2 water	\$12 - \$28	Class 2 wastewater	\$13 - \$23
Class 3 water	\$14 - \$31	Class 3 wastewater	\$15 - \$27
Class 4 water	\$14 - \$32	Class 4 wastewater	\$12 - \$28

The certification exam process . . .

In my article last November, I identified the exam, including the process to take the exam, as a challenge or issue preventing many employees from becoming certified. This conclusion has many valid arguments from both sides of the fence. The folks taking the exams believe the test covers materials that are outside of the scope of the classification they are testing for. And conversely, KDHE can rightfully say that according to the current classifications and requirements the exam takers are not studying the appropriate materials or spending enough time preparing. For this area it will probably be best to agree to disagree as to the actual reason for the exam to be the issue. It is my understanding that KDHE is willing to review the exam and study materials for relevance to the exam questions.

Most of the requests for technical assistance I receive are for towns and communities of less than a few thousand people. And usually the community has only a few hundred people. Generally, they are the towns where the operator is the “it” person. They are it when you ask who is the street department, lawnmower, electrician, parks, cemetery, water and wastewater operator, etc., and usually the dog catcher. According to a quick Google search a receptionist pay range is \$14 to \$24 and a front desk job pay range is \$14 to \$22. As you can see from the certified operator pay range there is potential for a Class 2 certified operator to be paid less than a receptionist or a front desk job. In no way is this belittling either indoor job; I’m only making a comparison of the wage to job duty.

“If I don’t do it, who would?”

The following is an example of a small town I am currently working with that is facing the challenges I have described in this article.

The mayor of a small town contacted me for assistance with mantling a certified operator. The mayor takes care of and maintains the town of less than 100 population for little if any pay. He does it because this is where he grew up and “If I don’t do it, who would?” The town recently lost its contract operator due to factors outside the city’s control and cannot find a replacement. KDHE has already given the city the “you have 30 days to find an operator” letter. While we were discussing potential operators in the area who may be willing to vouch for the city and be the contract operator, I told the mayor about the KDHE contract operator list. The mayor explained that the city did not have any money saved or couldn’t generate enough

Who else . . . ?

It’s my opinion that operators should make the most money of everyone on the city or water district staff. I say this with confidence because I use the comparison of “wage to duties performed”. Most operators would say they are satisfied with the wage they are paid. But if we take into account the duties and responsibilities it seems to me, they make peanuts on the dollar.

Who else amongst the city or RWD staff is in charge of producing or distributing a product that will be consumed into the body of nearly every citizen daily?

Who else, by not doing his or her job duties, could impact and entire community with sickness or death?

Who else is going to work daily in an environment where the entire community’s human excrement flows into one location that the operators get to call their office for 8-, 10-, or 12-hour shifts? Let’s not forget to mention the extreme health hazards with daily exposure to every single blood borne pathogen, virus, and unidentified nastiness of an entire community that all flows right into your “office.”

Who else is going out in the rain, sleet, and snow or even worse on a 100-degree August day and purposely position themselves downstream of the mayor’s excrement line to the city wastewater collection system to be sure the mayor’s excrement does not back up into his or her home?

Who else is required to work holidays and weekends and be on call in many cases 24/7?

Who else but the communities’ water and wastewater operators – both certified and non-certified?

Maguire Iron, Inc.
SINCE 1915
WATER TOWER EXPERTS

(605) 334-9749 | MAGUIREIRON.COM | f t i

TANK MAINTENANCE & NEW TANKS

- Full-Service and Custom Tank Maintenance Plans
- Interior/Exterior Tank Painting
- Interior/Exterior Sandblasting and Containment
- Interior/Exterior Tank Inspections
- Lead Abatement
- Interior Tank Cleaning and Disinfection
- Custom Tank Logos
- Chemical Cleaning
- Tank Mixing Systems
- 24-Hour Emergency Services

EXTEND THE LIFE OF YOUR WATER TANK

TONY GRANT
Kansas Water Tower Expert
(913) 787-2853 | grantt@maguireiron.com



When the city of Toronto's main sewage line to the treatment plant ruptured in a creek crossing, city staff and KRWA staff worked through the night to temporarily repair the line to keep sewage from flowing into Toronto Reservoir.

revenue to spend much for the contract operator. He thought the city could swing \$100 a month but would rather pay \$50. The mayor also considered taking \$25 from his pay to add to the pot if that is what it took to hire someone. The previous contract operator who is no longer the city's contract operator charged \$50 per year. The mayor did not expect to find the same type of deal.

From the beginning I encouraged the mayor to become the operator. He had just started a new good paying job as a mechanic for a nine thousand population city. He drives close to 40 miles round trip each day for work. He checks

the lagoons and the two lift stations every day when he gets back to town. One lift station is across the road from his residence. They have had pump issues and replacement pumps are expensive and the city has had to buy or rebuild pumps every 18 months.

Having long-time, certified operators is imperative, both operationally and financially for water and wastewater systems.

Necessity for training

The first time I asked the mayor about assuming the operator position he said he would not have time to study to take a test that he knows nothing about. I disagreed. I told him just from talking to him about the wastewater system and the daily operations that it was apparent he understood how his system works. That is half the battle! He also said that he does not know anything about activated sludge (AS) and that he had heard there are questions on the Class 1 exam about (AS).

I explained that the OIT has to be granted by KDHE because there are criteria to be eligible. I checked with KDHE and the city would be allowed to have an OIT.

The mayor was still reluctant to be the OIT and he said he didn't think he would be able to pass the test in one year because he heard it was impossible and that the percentage pass rates were so low he would surely have to take it more than once. This is an example of an unintentional effect from my previous article. He would not have known those percentage pass rates had I not mentioned that in my November article.

A-1 Pump & Jet Services, Inc

620-342-5100 • www.a1pumpjet.com

“Best Value in Waste Water Services in Kansas”

Sewer Line Maintenance • Pump / Vacuum Services

Camera Inspection • 24 Hour Emergency Service

Lagoon Cleanout • Lime Sludge Removal

No Contracts Required

2036 Road F-5 • Emporia, Kansas 66801 • ron.mccoy@a1pumpjet.com



Over the Fourth of July weekend in 2019, the city of Lane had the main water line to the town break at a river crossing during high water. The town had limited amount of stored water. Through quick actions from local operators and assistance from KRWA and the community volunteers, a temporary water line was laid across a bridge. Because of quick action, the town was never without water.

A word to operators . . .

If you have put your time and effort in preparing for a certification test but were unsuccessful, don't be discouraged. Reach out to KRWA or any of the resources you have available to better prepare you for the next test. Please keep trying until you pass the test. I meet only a few people who say they have taken an operator exam and passed on the first time. At least not those who have been taking the exam in the past few years.

There are many unsung heroes in the certified operator world. Most do not do it for the pay, but do it for the pride of the community.

There are many unsung heroes in the certified operator world. Most do not do it for the pay, but do it for the pride of the community.

A closing comment . . .

I want to make a comment on behalf of Vickie Wessel. Vickie was the operator certification officer at KDHE for the past 30 years. She retired from the agency in December 2019. For those of you who knew Vickie or encountered her on the telephone might think I am being facetious in saying that I will miss her voice on the other end of the phone when I have an operator question. In the ten years at KDHE she and I discussed random thoughts, we laughed sometimes, argued and then we would laugh again – and we have even shared a beer. Best wishes to you Vickie on achieving a well-deserved retirement.

Jason Solomon works primarily as a wastewater tech at KRWA. He previously was District Environmental Administrator at the Kansas Department of Health and Environment southeast Kansas office in Chanute, Kansas.



Bartlett & West

Clean, safe and reliable water is a basic building block of a modern community. Residents and industry depend on your system. You need proactive communications regarding system needs and innovative, comprehensive solutions. As a national leader with long-time relationships in water-focused services, Bartlett & West is your ally for success.

Water Solutions

for community growth

Bartlett & West partners with businesses and communities to build smarter, stronger, more connected infrastructure. With industry knowledge and creative approaches, we engineer better tomorrows.

1200 SW Executive Drive
Topeka, KS
(785) 272-2252
www.bartwest.com