



City of Homer

www.cityofhomer-ak.gov

Public Works

3575 Heath Street
Homer, AK 99603

publicworks@cityofhomer-ak.gov

(p) 907- 235-3170

(f) 907-235-3145

Memorandum 20-205

TO: Mayor and Homer City Council
THROUGH: Rob Dumouchel, City Manager
FROM: Janette Keiser, Director of Public Works
DATE: December 3, 2020
SUBJECT: Industry Standards Relating to Water-Sewer Reserves and Q&A

I have been continuing to research benchmarks related to the financial matters for water/sewer utilities, using the Environmental Protection Agency's Environmental Finance Service Center ("EPA"), American Water and Wastewater Association ("AWWA") and other water/wastewater industry experts, as well as the Government Finance Officers Association ("GFOA"), as resources. In particular, I've been looking for answers to questions posed by the Council and staff about such matters. Here is a summary of findings and conclusions:

Question #1: What do we need reserves for?

Answer: Attached is a summary of the basic Elements of Reserves for a typical utility Fund, which identifies various categories of reserve funds, the total sum of which represents a utility's Reserve Fund:

- Operating Reserves
- Capital Contingencies
- Equipment Replacement
- Debt Service Coverage

Question #2: How much money should we have in our Water/Sewer Reserve Funds?

Answer: There are industry standards for each element, which are identified on the attached Elements of Reserves. Obviously, the level of the City's Reserve Funds depends on affordability and need. There are industry standard tools for measuring both factors and for guiding the gradual development of a sustainable level of funding.

Question #3: How should we build the Reserve Funds?

Answer: Usually, utilities include an element in their tariffs to build their reserve funds, because that is the only source of revenue they have, beyond grants, debtor or one-off injections of cash, such as from a sale of property. In Homer, we have another source of funding for capital projects, the HAWSP Fund, but

this is unique to Homer. And, analysis of the HAWSP Fund's purpose and need demonstrates that Homer needs multiple sources of revenue to support its relatively expensive utility systems.

Question #4: How should we spend money from the Reserve Funds?

Answer: It is a Best Practice for utilities to have written financial policies that govern how their reserve funds are spent. Further, expenditure of reserve funds should require authorization by the governing body and be based on approved planning documents that identify project needs and project cash flow. Developing and maintaining a robust asset management system is also a Best Practice to assist with preventative maintenance and long-term planning of asset replacement.

Question #5: How do I know if our Reserve Funds are healthy?

Answer: The AWWA, EPA and GFOA all recommend that Reserve Funds be subject to oversight in accordance with Generally Accepted Accounting Practices and the municipality's financial policies, generally through the budget process. There are Best Practices to guide these processes.

Question #6: How do we keep the Reserves from continuing to build at the expense of our rate/tax payers?

Answer: The Reserve Funds are built from the water/sewer rates, which are adjusted annually and linked to the budget and capital planning processes. This gives the governing body multiple opportunities to adjust the Reserve Funds to affordable levels, which address needs. Further, the governing body will receive financial reports, at least quarterly, which it can review in the context of the body's established financial policies.

Question #7: What else can we do to bring some clarity to these matters?

Answer: All the resource agencies recommend as a Best Practice, that utilities have written, and codified financial policies, to guide decision making and accountability. The City of Homer has a number of financial policies, but they are not necessarily in the same place and some of the provisions are ambiguous enough to allow different interpretations, which can cause confusion and conflict. The City can review its financial policies to (1) fill in any blanks; (2) clarify any ambiguities; and (3) reconcile any conflicts.

Elements of Reserves in a Utility Fund

- **Operating Reserves** – These are cash reserves available to cushion the time lag between when billing happens and when bills are paid. Industry standards recommend having reserves totaling 60-90 days of operating and maintenance costs.

<u>Utility</u>	<u>Total Operating Costs</u>	<u>Recommended Operating Reserve</u>
Water	\$2,320,278	\$381,415 - \$572,040
Sewer	\$1,788,617	\$294,000 - \$441,000

- **Capital Contingency** – These funds pay for unexpected major repairs. Industry standards recommend an amount equal to 1-2% of the system’s fixed assets.

<u>Utility</u>	<u>Value of Fixed Assets¹</u>	<u>Recommended Capital Contingency</u>
Water	\$48,920,806	\$489,208 - \$978,416
Sewer	\$44,707,860	\$447,078 - \$894,157

- **Infrastructure Replacement Funding** – These funds are used to replace assets, in accordance with established planning documents, such as an Asset Management Plan, a Capital Improvement Plan and an Equipment Replacement Schedule. The numbers below represent numbers from the Draft Asset Management Plan.

<u>Utility</u>	<u>Reserve Required to Build Replacement Fund²</u>
Water	\$7,573,704
Sewer	\$5,280,544

- **Totals**

<u>Utility</u>	<u>I</u>	<u>II</u>	<u>III</u>	<u>IV</u>	<u>V</u>	<u>VI</u>
<u>Utility</u>	<u>Operating Reserve</u>	<u>Capital Contingency</u>	<u>Minimum (II + III)</u>	<u>Infrastructure Replacement</u>	<u>Totals</u>	
Water	\$572,000	\$978,416	\$1,550,416	\$7,573,704	\$9,124,120	
Sewer	\$441,000	\$894,157	\$1,335,157	\$5,280,544	\$6,615,701	

¹ From AML insurance worksheet showing 2019 value of City Building Assets

² From 2020 draft Asset Management Plan prepared by JAK

- **Debt Service Coverage** – This includes payments required to service debt as well as minimum levels of reserves required to cover bond covenants.

HAWSP Fund Debt Payment – principal & interest \$1,029,766/Year

- **Debt management** – Credit agencies don't like utilities to fund all their capital improvements with debt, but prefer that no more than 60% of a project is financed with debt.