

Solving Water Infrastructure Mysteries Through Social Media

BY WATER NEWS NETWORK

How many people drive or walk past pipes sticking out of the ground and wonder, “What is that thing?” While sitting in his car at a red light one day in northern San Diego County, John Carnegie, customer services manager for Olivenhain Municipal Water District (OMWD), Encinitas, Calif., realized that some members of the public probably aren't aware of how key water infrastructure objects in their neighborhoods play a role in delivering safe, reliable water.

Thinking about water infrastructure from a public perspective prompted a fun social media campaign that teaches water customers about the components and efforts that go into delivering safe, reliable water: #WhatIsThatThing.

“The social media campaign that OMWD developed is a fantastic program that helps inform the public of the infrastructure that exists all around them, their homes, and places of work,” explains OMWD Board Director Bob Topolovac. “These types of campaigns are a great outreach mechanism to create appreciation for all the important work and projects that water agencies undertake in delivering water supplies to the public and wastewater services.”

“It's easy to forget the long path it takes to get safe and reliable water to your tap,” adds OMWD Board Secretary

Ed Sprague. “It's easy for most people to think only as far as their water meter, not to the infrastructure around them that delivers water to their homes.”

OUTREACH EFFORTS

Posts are published on OMWD's Twitter and Facebook accounts and feature a photo and description of the infrastructure item. Photos are provided by the agency's field service technicians who are out in the field working on service assignments. OMWD Administrative Analyst Arman Tarzi says the field service technicians pass along contributions when they see something the public might want to know more about.

“Our field services staff see the unique items that are in plain sight but often go unnoticed, and they contribute their ideas to our Public Affairs team,” says Tarzi. “They are strong partners in this project.”

According to Tarzi, the images help members of the community understand how infrastructure in their area functions.

“For example, you might see a pipe with water coming out of it and think it is leaking,” he says. “But it may be a vault relief doing its job properly, so the social media campaign can help relieve concerns while providing information in a fun way.”

Tarzi says that as the public spends more time outside during the COVID-19 pandemic, people may be curious about all the infrastructure around them, which is maintained by OMWD's essential employees.

“Campaigns such as #WhatIsThatThing establish a better understanding of what OMWD does to maintain its water infrastructure,” explains Topolovac. “When we post unfamiliar items, we're making the public aware that not only is it important to maintain our system but that vital infrastructure is truly all around them.”

PROVEN SUCCESS

OMWD's #WhatIsThatThing campaign has gotten a warm reception. Water agencies across the United States might consider creating similar informational campaigns to highlight infrastructure items that are easily visible to their customers. Educating the public in this way can directly connect people to the water infrastructure they see every day on their commutes to work, outside their homes, or while on walks through their neighborhoods. Such awareness campaigns bring a level of appreciation to all the services water agencies provide and the potential for increased public support for the funding of future infrastructure improvement projects.

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A backflow preventer (left) and a recycled water air relief valve (right) are examples of water infrastructure highlighted in OMWD's #WhatIsThatThing? campaign.

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