

## Running on a Shoestring Budget



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Type shoestring budget in a Web search and you will come up with how-to suggestions for just about anything: weddings, cooking, travel, education, marketing, you name it. Doing more with less is a motto for any business these days, and municipalities are no different.

For years now, municipalities have applied some very creative thinking when dealing with higher service demands due to population growth on a tight budget. In the last few years, however, budgets have shrunk more than ever and manpower cutbacks are quickly becoming the norm.

Sadly, this year's not-so-rosy funding projections are leaving municipalities to wonder if there are any notches left to tighten on the municipal budget belt. So how long before the budget strains begin to affect the quality of services provided?

The Washington State Department of Ecology reported in its Budget and Program Overview that the department's Water Resources Program budget was reduced \$4.7 million recently,

from \$42.9 million in the 2007-09 biennium to \$38.2 million in the 2009-11 biennium. Of this amount, a \$2.9-million reduction was directed specifically at the processing of water right applications, while the remainder was distributed across the program.

As a result of these cuts, the Water Resources Program now has 25% fewer staff members to make water right permit decisions. According to the department, the staff cuts will decrease the number of water right permit applications that can be acted on from about 500 to 370 per year—and the backlog is only expected to grow.

Currently, the department reports that there are about 5,700 applications for new water rights and 1,200 applications for water right changes in line. "Keeping up with the growing demand was difficult even before the new budget reductions, and some applicants have waited months or years for water right decisions," the report said.

These budget cuts also are starting to trickle down to some public health and safety actions in the various regions. For example, the department reported that in the Yakima, Wash., region, cuts have affected the approval of two new wells for the Bray's Landing public water system in Chelan County to replace wells with coliform bacterial contamination. In the Lacey, Wash., region, the cuts have affected approval of a new water source for the city of Longview, which is switching to a sand and gravel aquifer next to the Columbia River from a surface water intake on the Cowlitz River that is clogged by high levels of abrasive volcanic silt.

Unfortunately, Washington is not the only state dealing with budget and staffing cuts. As population growth continues to outpace budgets across the country, many municipalities continue to incur more debt in order to maintain existing infrastructure and address necessary improvements. With ever-diminishing funding options, we are reaching a critical stage in the management of our country's water infrastructure. As the cost of providing clean, safe water continues to increase, it is time to reassess the true value of the services our industry provides.

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*Water & Wastes Digest* is published exclusively for the 85,000+ decision makers in the municipal and industrial water, wastewater and water pollution industries. These individuals actively design, specify, buy, operate and maintain the equipment, chemicals and services used for water treatment. Editorial content in this audited publication highlights new products and technologies concerning the supply, collection, treatment and distribution of drinking water; the collection, treatment and disposal of wastewater; and hazardous waste pollution control. A product directory is included in the annual June Buyer's Guide.

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