



TREE ROOTS IN THE SEWER?

Frequently Asked Questions

What does my sewer look like? Generally, your sewer lateral is 4 to 6 inches in diameter and is made of vitrified clay, PVC, ABS or iron pipe. The sewer lateral is anywhere from 2 to 6 feet underground and runs from your house to a main line connection in the street. There are various joints along the lateral and where the lines connect to the house and the main line under the street. These joints generally use rubber or other soft material to seal the connections.

Who maintains the lateral? The homeowner owns and is responsible for maintaining the sewer lateral from the connection at the house to the connection at the main line under the street. Another public agency, the Costa Mesa Sanitary District, owns and is responsible for maintaining the main line under the street. They may be reached at (949) 645-8400.

How did the roots get in the sewer lateral? Trees, bushes and plants need water and nutrients in order to survive and will seek out the easiest source of water and nutrients. Generally, when roots encounter the sewer lateral, nothing will happen because they will grow over and around the lateral. However, if there is a leak, no matter how small, tiny hair like roots will enter the lateral and rapidly grow on the nutrient rich material. Eventually, these roots may block the lateral and back-up the system.

Who is responsible for the damage? Responsibility depends on why the roots entered the sewer lateral. Generally, the City is responsible for damage only when the City has determined that tree roots from a City tree have misaligned or broken the sewer lateral line. In all other cases, the City is not responsible. Earth movement, normal expansion and contraction of the soil, defective construction, improper maintenance, and private property tree roots can cause the sewer lateral to misalign, allowing roots to enter at the joint or connection.

But the roots came from the tree in the parkway. Parkway are the public right-of-way from the back of the curb to the private property line and can include landscaping and/or sidewalk. Standard widths vary from 5 feet to 10 feet depending on the type of street, i.e. primary, secondary, residential, etc. The City owns and maintains many thousands of trees in these parkways, but the presence of a City tree in the parkway does not automatically mean the City is responsible for the damage. The City is responsible for damage to a homeowner's sewer lateral when the City tree's roots misalign or wrap around it and break or crush the pipe itself. However, if the roots entered at the joint due to the sewer lateral being misaligned for any other reason, the homeowner is responsible.

How do I prove where the roots entered the sewer lateral? In order to prove why and where the roots entered, it is necessary to excavate the sewer lateral. Once it is exposed, it is the homeowner's responsibility to ensure City representatives can inspect the sewer lateral and determine exactly why and where the roots entered. No roots should be cut or removed because it is critical for the City's representative to see how they have grown. It is also recommended that the homeowner videotape the lateral to determine the location of the damage.

Who pays to dig up the sewer lateral? The homeowner must pay for the excavation of the sewer lateral. However, if the City representative determines the City tree caused the damage to the sewer lateral, the City will then pay for the repair of the portion of the line damaged and the portion of the excavation needed to expose the damaged sewer lateral. If the roots entered due to the sewer lateral being misaligned or for any other reason, the homeowner is responsible for the entire cost of excavation and repair. If the City does pay for a portion of the repair but the homeowner has the entire line replaced, the homeowner is responsible for paying for the rest of the replacement and the portion of the excavation not related to the repairs the City pays for.

I want the tree removed. The City has established criteria that permit the removal of trees. For further information on removing trees, please contact the Public Services Department, Maintenance Division at (714) 754-5123. If removal of your tree is approved, please be aware that this does not necessarily mean the City is responsible for your sewer lateral damage. As explained above, responsibility depends on why the roots entered the sewer lateral.

I want to file a claim. The law provides specific guidelines for filing a claim with a municipality. For further information on obtaining a claim form, please contact the Risk Management Division at (714) 754-5228.