



CONNECTING COMMUNITY: **Pipes are really about people**

There's a lot more to replacing water pipes than you'd think. It turns out, pipes are really about people. People who enjoy safe, reliable water. People in the community who share an interest in the project and the people on the City of Richmond Public Works crew who put people first. And with every project, the crews are demonstrating the City's corporate values: people, excellence, leadership, team and innovation.



Putting water pipes in the ground and hooking them up to homes is just part of what goes on when the City upgrades its watermain infrastructure. When you pass by the Springfield area, where the crew is installing new water pipes, you will see everything you expect: an excavator and other big equipment, crew members working together in hard hats and steel-toed boots with shovels and other tools, stacks of long blue pipes and lots of dirt.

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It's evident that there is a routine, even a rhythm, to their work, and they make quick progress, completing about 15 lengths of pipe a day (that's 90 metres). The City is investing \$1,505,000 to replace the watermain, add new hydrants and make other improvements in the area. The work includes digging the ground out, putting in the pipe, burying the pipe, installing valves and hydrants, testing the water pressure, chlorinating the water, dechlorinating the water, initiating water quality tests, connecting the water service to homes and smoothing out the area to make sure it's safe for drivers while waiting for paving. They move about 30 truckloads of soil (some in, some out) daily, and they get everything ready for each service connection so that residents are only without water for about 15 minutes. It's a lot.

"Not many people really like to do what we do, but the guys on this crew want to do the work and they care about the product they put in the ground," says Jason Butler, the supervisor of the water crew. "They work really hard to get the job done well, and get it done quickly. I think my crew is one of the best. We're a tight-knit group."

The quality of their workmanship is evident, as, from the time they first took on these types of projects about eight years ago, they continue to complete them on time and on (or even under) budget. Butler notes that their work also supports sustainability goals for the City as older pipes leak; whereas, with the new PVC pipes, zero leakage is permitted. They also recycle and reuse their materials, which are produced from the Sidaway site.

But when you spend a bit more time watching and listening, (and okay, speaking to their supervisor), you'll discover there's even more going on. When putting pipes in the ground for water service, the crew sees more than the task at hand. They recognize (and emphasize) the importance of a safe, reliable water, and the critical need to support a sustainable water supply to protect this limited and highly valuable resource.



They take pride in their work, and they keep the bigger picture in mind: the people who are connected to the system.

Before every project, the City sends letters to all the area residents who are affected by the construction work. That's pretty standard. But Butler takes it a step further to connect in person with people in the area. On his current project, he noted that there was a school nearby so he went to speak to the principal to let him know about the project and invited classes to drop by to see the work underway. About five classes took him up on his offer, and Butler not only talked to them about the work underway, he used it as an opportunity to teach them about water conservation.

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"I explain the water cycle, how much water there is on earth, and how little of it is water we can drink," says Butler. "It's a lot of work to get the water we enjoy daily, and I ask them to do their part to conserve water, like turning the water off while brushing their teeth."

Then there's the honorary member of their crew: Daniel, a young man with autism who lives in the community, is passionate about water pipes and the work they are doing. Rather than pushing him away, the crew connected with his father, confirmed that he had the required safety gear and allows him on the site with supervision so that he feels like part of the team.

And then there are the many positive community connections that they make simply by reaching out, being friendly and communicating with residents. Residents appreciate the extra effort to keep them informed, and they respond in many positive ways. One dropped by with sandwiches for the whole crew – and Butler shared his with Daniel. A home for adults with disabilities was also in the construction area for a recent project, and they painted thank-you signs on canvas and gave them to the crew.

Others call the City or send emails like these:

"I just had a call from a resident by the name of Terry to compliment the crew working on the watermain in the Chatsworth area, particularly Jason Butler. He said they are all doing a great job and have been super at dealing with the residents and keeping them up-to-date on the project."

"We want to share our appreciation of the onsite project team. They have consistently taken the time to provide us with updates; shown a strong work ethic; and, demonstrated a commitment to our safety while ensuring limited disruption in access to and from our property during the City's work hours. While the water pipe replacement project is not yet completed, it has so far been a very positive experience for us because of the highly competent on-site employees doing their jobs effectively."

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In addition to open, friendly and consistent communication, Butler's crew also puts people first by assessing how their work will affect residents. As an example, on the current project, the surveyors had marked the placement of a hydrant based on the required distance between each hydrant on the street. But this particular placement would result in the hydrant sitting right in the middle of the resident's garden, displacing a recently planted apple tree. Butler approached the residents on the affected property and asked them if they would be fine with him shifting it over a bit to save the tree and put it in a less disruptive location.

"The resident's son was there and was very worried about the apple tree being hurt by the hydrant, so they were happy to see it moved, and the small adjustment is something we can do for them while still meeting all the distance requirements," says Butler.

When asked about why he thinks his crew is so successful, Butler emphasizes that it's a group effort – and there are more crews involved who contribute to their success. Other crews include surveyors, engineering, roads/paving, inspection, water testing, transportation and project management.

But when pushed about his crew specifically, he notes that they share the same goal and everyone is ready to do any job needed.

"We want to make the area better than when we got there, so we look for ways to do that beyond the project itself, like fixing sidewalks and helping residents," says Butler. "We don't take short cuts, and we all do everything. No one says 'that's not my job' and we start the day with 'what can we do' and then work together to make it happen."

When Kenny Laboucane, also a leader of the crew, dropped by, Butler asked him why he thought they were successful. His response: "We're like a hockey team where you may not have all the best players on your team, but it all gels. It's the best crew. We've worked together for a long time. We're buddies. How many people can come into work every day with their best friends?"

Leveraging the success of Butler's crew, the City now also uses them as training ground to teach other crews how they work, and how they connect with the community.

Ultimately, what they do is truly public works. They don't just connect pipes, they connect with people. And the end result is about more than just safe, reliable drinking water. It's about building community.

