

SEWER

# CLEANING UP DIRTY WATER IN HOUSTON

by Aaron "Cujo" Cooley



**E**nvironmental awareness is growing and municipalities all over the country are attempting to solve complex issues as they relate to power washing and cosmetic cleaning. Among the larger issues that are being addressed are community education, contractor compliance, and implementations of regulations and Best Management Practices (BMP's) for dealing with wash water and runoff. The generally accepted and heavily simplified rule is that nothing but rain goes down the drain, but practical and real implementation of that concept can be an entirely different matter.

Citing a growing non-compliance problem, including criminal investigations, intense fines, and potential lawsuits, Sylvia Brumlow of the Environmental Investigations Unit of the Houston Police Department contacted the PWNA to see if they could help with discussions surrounding recent regulations enacted there. In fact, the regulatory issues have been so intense and police actions so severe that commercial power wash contractors completely stopped power washing in the city for a short time.

In response to this need, PWNA Vice President Brian Penney and I, as PWNA secretary, made the trip to Houston, Texas to attend a conference hosted by Standard Parking and the City of Houston. An additional benefit to the visit was the fact that Penney serves as the Chair of the PWNA Education Committee and I serve as the Chair of the PWNA Environmental Committee. Also in attendance was Robert Hinderliter, founder of the PWNA, former

Environmental Committee Chair, and environmental power wash expert.

At the conference, which involved approximately 300 contractors, managers, and property owners, several speakers representing various environmental, regulatory, and law enforcement agencies were brought before the crowd highlighting the facts of Texas law, ramifications of breaking it, and the penalties once convicted. It should be noted that Houston officials are enforcing a zero-tolerance policy, with some of the most restrictive regulations ever seen. Understandably, local contractors are crumbling under the immense pressure of incomplete, contradictory, and confusing regulations.

It was found during a Q&A that under some circumstances the regulations were in direct conflict and compliance was still mandatory. For example, local POTW officials stated that once wash water was reclaimed, contractors were not allowed to discharge into the sanitary sewers of commercial locations. Rather, contractors are required to transport this recovered product to one of only four locations in the entire metro Houston area for proper disposal. This was explained as a necessity because the POTW has deemed contractors as incapable of doing so correctly. Further, giving up control of the access points was not a situation that they ever wanted to become commonplace. In the next series of questions, though, the same official stated that in the event of a building wash, such as the high-rise building we were currently in, the wash water could be recovered and pumped directly into the sanitary sewer without any special handling. As you might imagine, compliance with two conflicting statements like this is going to be interesting indeed.

The PWNA was also given a chance to speak and several strong points were made. Starting with a stated commitment to education and environmental awareness, I explained that in any situation involving environmental regulations, practical solutions are the key to winning the day and

I further stated that rational, reasonable, and logical solutions can be developed when contractors and regulators work together. When this happens, voluntary compliance soars and the strong arm tactics of heavy police actions are eliminated. Hinderliter also strongly echoed this, adding that voluntary compliance jurisdictions worked exceptionally well, heavily reducing pollution levels; while the cost to the local community was reduced to near zero by the elimination of the need for large staff allocations required

for heavy police actions. Other parts of the discussion centered around the relative ease of compliance when practical BMP's are in effect, and that the investment required for minimal compliance is not the thousands of dollars that has been discussed, but could be as little as a few hundred dollars.

Cleaning up the dirty water in Houston is going to be a big job and it won't be easy. However, local officials, local contractors, and the PWNA are committed to finding reasonable solutions that everyone can abide by. *CT*

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