Backwater Valves and Preventing Sewer Backups

*Ugh!* Sewer backups are not only unpleasant and inconvenient, but can also result in costly damage. A backwater valve may help prevent a potential sewer backup from occurring on your property.

**What is a sewer backwater valve?**
The majority of properties in Santa Barbara have been built so that a blockage in the public sewer will not cause a sewage backup into the property. If a backup occurs, it is usually due to roots or debris in the owner’s sewer lateral (the pipe that connects the property to the public sewer).

However, some properties require the protection of a backwater valve in the owner’s lateral line. Homes, businesses, and other structures with drainage fixtures such as a shower pan, tub, toilet, or sink rim that are located below the elevation of the next upstream manhole cover are required to install and maintain an “approved” backwater valve. The backwater valve is designed to automatically close, preventing sewage from backing up into the building from a blocked public sewer.

*Source: Los Angeles County Public Works*
What should I check for?
1. If you have any plumbing fixtures lower than the street in front of your house, you may need a backwater valve.
2. If the street outside your house runs steeply uphill, you may need a backwater valve.
3. If your property already has a backwater valve, it needs to be checked and maintained regularly.

Who is responsible for the installation and maintenance of backwater valves?
Property owners are responsible for the installation and maintenance of backwater valves. If you think you might need a backwater valve, or if you have questions about locating or checking the device, the City encourages you to contact a licensed plumber who can evaluate your situation and, if necessary, install a backwater valve.

Do I need a permit for a backwater valve?
Yes, a City plumbing permit is required for the installation of a backwater valve. For permit information, contact the Building and Safety Division at (805) 564-5485.

How often should I check the backwater valve?
We recommend that you check and maintain the valve at least once a year. If you have a history of sewer blockages, you should check more often. For any maintenance questions or issues, please contact a licensed plumber.

Other Helpful Tips to Prevent Sewer Backups
- Regular maintenance of your lateral line will prevent obstructed flow. Roots from trees, large shrubs, and plants are attracted to water. So if your lateral line is cracked, roots will gravitate towards the water source, enter the line, and eventually interfere with the flow.

- Avoid disposing of bulky trash items into the City sewer through toilets, sinks, or storm drains. Backups can result because your property’s lateral line may be as small as three inches in diameter.

- Do not dispose of oil, fat, or grease into the City sewer through toilets, sinks, or storm drains. It is a violation of the Municipal Code for anyone to dispose of these substances—regardless of the source—through a sewer. Commercial operations such as restaurants are required to have a grease trap. Industrial wastewater generators are required to install a pretreatment facility to process waste prior to disposal.

If you are not the property owner and want to protect against potential uninsurable damage to your personal property, share these maintenance and preventive tips with your landlord, manager, or the property owner.