

Public Works Museum

Educates Area Residents



Clean, plentiful drinking water, working toilets, dependable electric power and telephone service – all are considered necessities that most of us take for granted. Not until one or more of these services fail do we realize how important they are.

With exceptions, doing without telephone service or access to the internet for a few hours is an irritating inconvenience. However, loss of water, sewer services or electrical power for even a day is a crisis that disrupts normal life.

Yet, few people understand how these vital systems work and what is required to keep them functioning, and most of the general public is unaware of the presence of the complex underground infrastructures that comprise them.

Want to know more about these vital services? The place to go is the Baltimore Public Works Museum, the first – and perhaps still the only – museum of its kind in the country.

Housed inside the historic – and still-operating – Eastern Avenue Pumping Station on Pier 7 of the city's popular Inner Harbor, the museum opened in 1982.

"The museum takes visitors behind the scenes to learn the fascinating story of how public works services shape a modern city and its environment," says Vince Pompa, the museum's director of programs and education.

What's on display

Exhibits include: artifacts such as wooden pipe nearly 200 years old; historic photographs; video presentations; and interactive computer-based stations to explain the history of public works and details about how essential services function today.

"One of the most popular is the 'Streetscape' outdoor exhibit," says Pompa. "It is a life-size model recreating both above- and below-ground utility structures. Visitors can see first hand the configuration of invisible below-ground infrastructure. It's like cutting a hole in a section of a neighborhood and visitors can go underneath the streets to see the pipes, and meters, and valves. Kids love crawling through the life-size manhole of the underground Streetscape exhibit."

Are sewer and water systems interesting?

The Baltimore museum makes it so, and Pompa says visitors represent surprisingly diverse backgrounds. The museum's location is in an attractive and popular tourist area housed in an historic building.

"Attendance grows every year as more people learn about us," says Pompa. "It is of particular interest to those who are, or have been, in the public works business in some fashion – engineers, workers, contractors. They see articles like the old wooden pipe and say, 'yes, we found some of that when we were working on a project.'"

Group tours are available, and Pompa says the staff can adapt them to fit the needs of different groups.



Baltimore Museum

Hands-on education

Area school children are frequent visitors and the museum conducts a popular Water Works School Program. Designed for elementary school students, the program covers how water is purified, ways it is used, and how water supplies can be conserved. Two-hour sessions include handling historical objects, performing water tests, exploring the Streetscape, and an on-site scavenger hunt.

The building housing the museum is itself of significant historical interest. The steel-frame, brick-face building is architecturally of interest, topped by a Victorian copper roof. Completed in 1912, it was the first and largest sewage pumping station constructed for Baltimore. The facility's original pumps were steam driven. Coal barges docked

adjacent to the building and a conveyor carried coal through openings in the top of the roof for storage in bunkers. The large steam pumps were replaced by electrical pumps in the 1960s. The museum is located in the original boiler and furnace room, where enormous 250-ton coal bunkers still are visible.

The facility remains in operation, pumping an average of 30 million gallons of wastewater a day and still is the largest of the city's 20 pumping stations which move sewage to higher elevations where it flows down to treatment plants.

The Baltimore Public Works Museum is owned and operated by the city of Baltimore Department of Public Works. Museum director is Mari B. Ross. For additional information and museum hours call (410) 396-5565 or go to the museum's recently redesigned web site: www.baltimorepublicworksmuseum.org. ■

Trash Into Jewelry

Garbage collection is another important public works service and residents of the city of Baltimore generate about 750 tons of trash a day. Among items for sale in the Baltimore Public Works Museum's gift shop are innovative jewelry items made from trash, including bracelets, earrings and pins made from recycled glass, aluminum beverage cans, bottle caps and automotive and telephone wire, as well as other merchandise including mobiles, sun catchers and glassware. Proceeds from the gift shop fund educational programs of the museum.

