

History of the John M. Asplund Wastewater Treatment Plant

The John M. Asplund Wastewater Treatment Plant was named after John M. Asplund, Chairman of the Greater Anchorage Area Borough from 1964 until October 1972. Asplund was also known as the Borough Mayor. The borough, founded in 1964, included the cities of Anchorage, Girdwood, and Basher within its boundaries. In 1975 the Borough and the cities unified to form the Municipality of Anchorage.

Dedication of Alaska's largest wastewater treatment plant occurred on July 17, 1972 with a host of local and federal dignitaries, including Alaska Governor William A. Egan, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Administrator William D. Ruckelshaus, Borough Chairman John M. Asplund, and Borough Public Works Director Robert H. Morriss. Music was provided at the dedication by the U.S. Army Alaska Band, conducted by Master Sergeant H.C. Arnett.

The dedication and formal ribbon cutting ceremony by Asplund and Ruckelshaus culminated nine years of work on Asplund's part, including six years of construction of portions of the Anchorage Bowl sewerage system. At the Borough Assembly meeting the evening before the dedication, the treatment facility was named in his honor. At the time EPA was still in its infancy having been created in 1970, and Ruckelshaus was its first administrator.

The following are Chairman Asplund's dedication remarks:

Thank you for attending our Sewage Treatment Plant Dedication. This dedication marks six long years of hard work in correcting an injustice to our environment.

I have often said you cannot clean up our streams and rivers by merely picking out the bottles and cans. There came a time when the citizens of our community decided that living with raw sewage in their neighborhood streams was not tolerable! At that point in time they charged the borough with giving them something better. With the completion of our treatment plant and the near future completion of the Areawide Interceptor Sewer System, this is accomplished, and we are truly one giant step closer to a clean community with clean air and clean water.

Our sewage treatment plant here at Point Woronzof will ultimately provide sewage treatment for approximately half of Alaska's population including the residents of the Anchorage Bowl Area, Fort Richardson, and Elmendorf Air Force Base.

Today, Alaska's future looks brighter and each of you can take pride in helping to make it possible.

John M. Asplund, Chairman
Greater Anchorage Area Borough

The day following the dedication, an editorial appeared in the Anchorage Daily Times and read, in part:

Mr. Asplund, the borough chairman, made getting the new sewer system and plant his crusade. The whole issue became embroiled in bitterness, wrapped in controversy, cluttered by confusion, and hampered by bungling at various stages of the game. The public felt itself deceived by the cost and was moved to anger at times by the charges, assessments and fees involved.

BUT THROUGH lawsuits and hearings, through the thick of battle and the haze of cigar smoke, Mr. Asplund drove ahead – possessed by an idea whose time had come.

In the end he prevailed – suffering a setback or two along the way, losing a battle here and a fight there. The war, however, he won – as evidenced by the dedication ceremonies yesterday at which Anchorage’s progress in this area was praised by the nation’s top environmental officer, William D. Ruckelshaus.

Even those who have so long disagreed with the sewer program and who have often fought the managerial system which produced it may have to agree reluctantly that the facility simply had to be.

IT MAY turn out to be one of those things which is never finished. It may become a facility that soon will be outmoded or will require replacement by something bigger and better.

But the point is that despite its frontier location, Anchorage could not develop as it should without solid waste (sic) treatment. Maybe for today the new facility is too much. But few doubt its essential need in the years ahead.

MR. ASPLUND no doubt sees the new sewer treatment plant which bears his name as the crowning achievement of a long career in public office.

Indeed, that it is.

Public Works Director Robert H. Morriss was responsible for construction of the borough’s new \$48.5 million sewerage system, according to a July 23, 1972 article in the [Anchorage Daily News](#). Morriss, a graduate of Georgia Tech with a degree in civil sanitary engineering, was selected from applicants interviewed by John Asplund and Herb Lang.

Speaking about the challenge of building an entirely new sewer system, Morriss said, “Every engineer works to do something right the first time, where you’re not just cleaning up someone else’s mess. I hope those won’t be famous last words”.

Morriss is later quoted in the article, “I soon found out that you don’t come up here and tell Alaskans “we did it this way in the ‘Lower 48’ when you don’t have anything satisfactory to point to.”

The Daily News article also states, “Another unusual Alaska problem came in the form of one Will Key Jefferson – an irascible gent who didn’t want the borough to be in the sewer business and who tossed 18 lawsuits at the borough government during the time Morriss was struggling to compete the system.”

The John M. Asplund Wastewater Treatment Plant started testing operations in July of 1972 by a 12-man operations and maintenance crew headed by Dick Hutson, who also served as the project engineer during construction of the plant. Mr. Hutson worked in a similar capacity at a position in Vancouver, British Columbia, and was selected by Mr. Morriss who commented in the Daily News article, “I looked all over the northwest for Dick”.

The treatment plant is officially known as the **John M. Asplund Water Pollution Control Facility** and is owned and operated by the Anchorage Water and Wastewater Utility, a public corporate authority of the Municipality of Anchorage.