

By Leslie Daniels

My introduction to Orangeburg Pipe began when my floor drain in the laundry room started backing up when I washed clothes. In one day I went from thinking my drain just needed to be snaked by a professional to having an estimate for \$16,000 in repairs laid in front of me. You and your neighbors have either already dealt with this issue or better start planning to deal with it.

Orangeburg was invented in the 1860s and manufactured by a company in Orangeburg, NY (hence the name). It is a fiber pipe made of layers of wood pulp and pitch (tar) pressed together. It was a low cost alternative to metal and used up until the 1970s. By code, all pipes under your houses and for the main city sewer lines had to be made of cast iron. However, from the point the pipe left your house until it met up with the main, the developers of CCH used Orangeburg pipe. It has a maximum life span of about 50 years (under ideal conditions) so guess what? If your sewer line hasn't been replaced yet, it will soon need to be because Orangeburg starts collapsing downward and also, due to all of our beautiful trees, gets broken up by roots as it is very brittle.

When you start down this path, here are some things to keep in mind:

1. The best thing you can do first is to have a company put a camera down your line to see exactly what is happening down there. There are some companies that offer specials to do this. But beware that if your drains are clogged by buildup or tree roots, the camera won't be able to go the whole way. But at least you'll be able to see if your pipe is PVC or Orangeburg.
2. Make sure you have the camera company mark where your old Orangeburg line goes, a lot of them run out the side of your house and under your driveway. Mine did! So instead of trying to follow that line and having to repair my driveway, I asked my company to abandon the old line and create a new line. They went straight out under the front foundation of my house and down to the street with just a couple 45 degree turns. Of course, they had to start inside my house at the main drain but that only required about 10 feet of concrete removal and actually allowed them to reconnect (at a better angle) the laundry drain to the main.
3. Your old main water line ran in the same hole as the Orangeburg pipe in most instances. So while they were at it, for a reasonable extra charge, they laid a new copper water line in the same new hole as the new PVC pipe because if we had sealed it up and then I had started having water leaks, we'd have to dig up the hole again later at much greater expense. This allowed them to add water pressure and new shut-off valves to bring it up to code.
4. City of Fairfax Utilities Dept (Chris at 703-385-7815) can have a staff member mark the road in front of your house where your sewer lines joins the main. This doesn't mean it runs straight up to your house from that point but will give you and whomever you choose to make the repairs a starting point from the other end. Do this before you start getting estimates so they are more accurate.
5. There is a relatively new technology called New Liner (or various names) which works a little like a deflated balloon. If your cast iron pipes under your house are in relatively

good condition but maybe have some holes, this liner can be inserted from your floor drain past the main drain and out as far as the cast iron goes. Then it is wet and enlarged and hardens giving you a PVC-like thin inner lining for your pipe which is much cheaper and neater than jack-hammering your concrete floors to put PVC pipe in. And it will extend the life of your inside pipes. However, major consensus is that it won't work well for Orangeburg because if they have already started to collapse or have dips, the liner will form to that and you won't have a good, straight line.

My job ended up costing about \$13,500 and was done in 3 ½ days. It'll take my yard a while to settle down, probably a few good snow packs will do the trick. I learned a lot more about plumbing than I ever wanted to know but now have a new drain and water pipe with good guarantee and no more Orangeburg!! I got several estimates before making a decision and I'm glad to answer any other questions you might have, please just give me a call at 703-383-1272.

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