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Pohler et al.

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(54) **MACERATING APPARATUS AND METHOD**

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B02C 18/00 (2006.01)
E03D 11/11 (2006.01)

(52) **U.S. Cl.**

CPC **E03D 9/10** (2013.01); **B02C 18/0092** (2013.01); **E03D 11/11** (2013.01); **Y10T 29/49721** (2015.01)

(58) **Field of Classification Search**

CPC **E03D 9/10**; **B02C 18/0092**
USPC **4/319-321**
See application file for complete search history.

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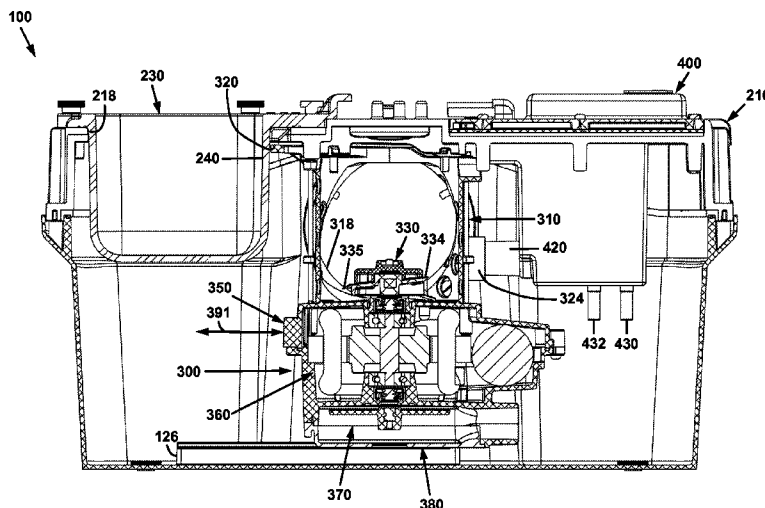
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(57) **ABSTRACT**

A macerating apparatus for a toilet in which the problem of jamming the macerator at startup is solved by rapidly detecting the flushing of the toilet and accelerating the macerator before motion-jamming solid objects in the effluent from the toilet can reach the macerator. The macerating apparatus may be comprised of a macerating cutter operatively connected to a motor, and a sensor in communication with the motor. The sensor may detect the flow of effluent from the toilet toward the macerator, the flow of makeup water from the supply tank into the toilet, or the mechanical action of the mechanism used to flush the toilet. The apparatus may include an intake basket having an asymmetric inlet tube and containing the macerating cutter, wherein the asymmetry of the inlet tube provides additional operating clearance between a cutting blade of the macerating cutter and the intake basket.

21 Claims, 16 Drawing Sheets



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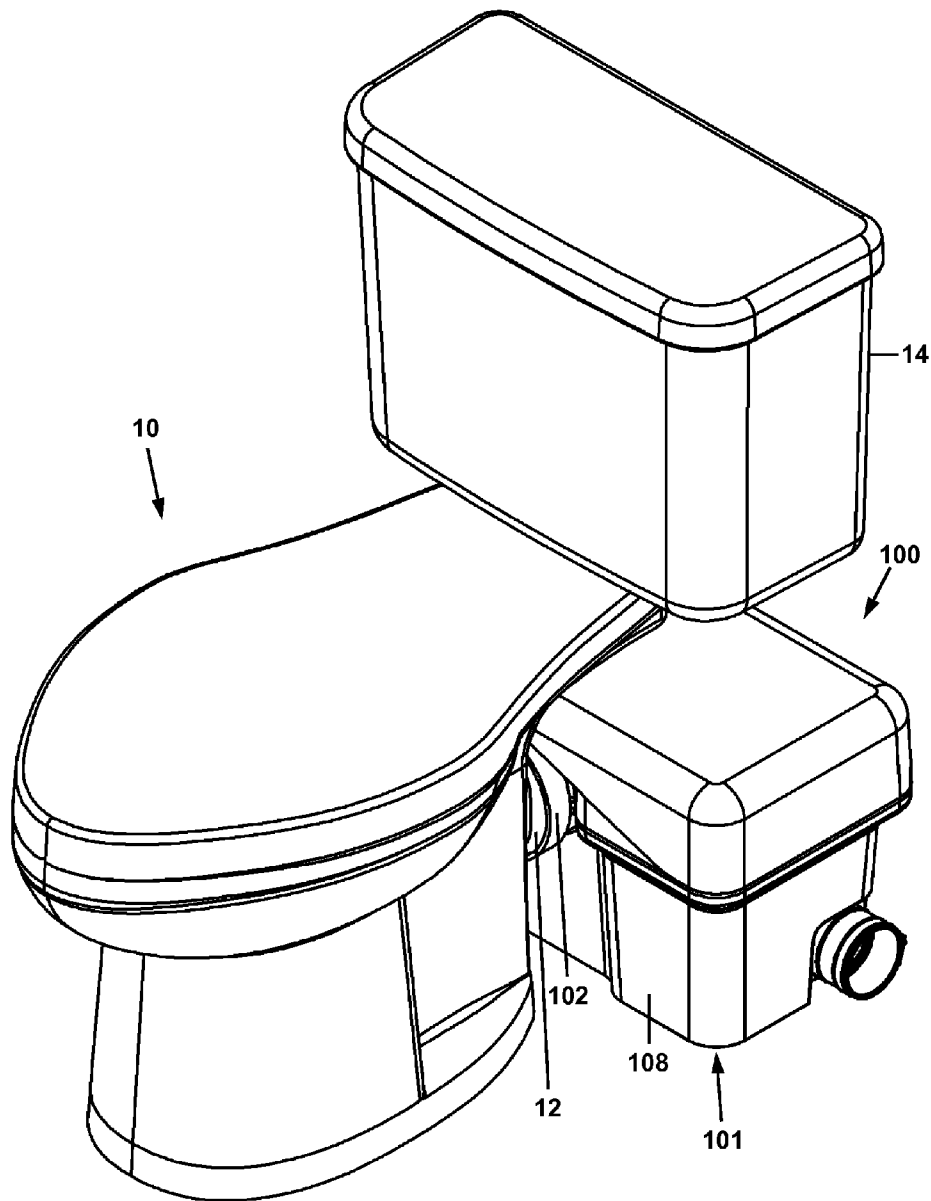


FIG. 1

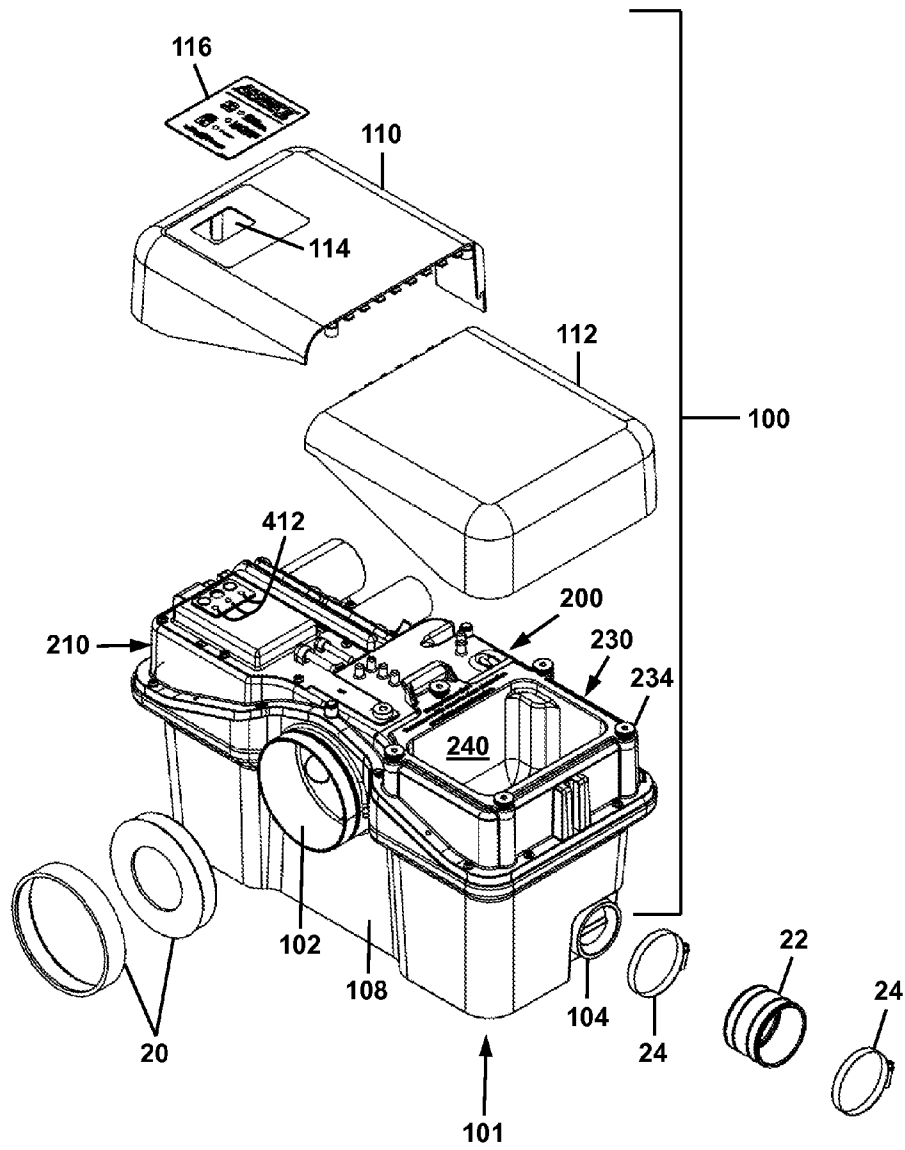


FIG. 2

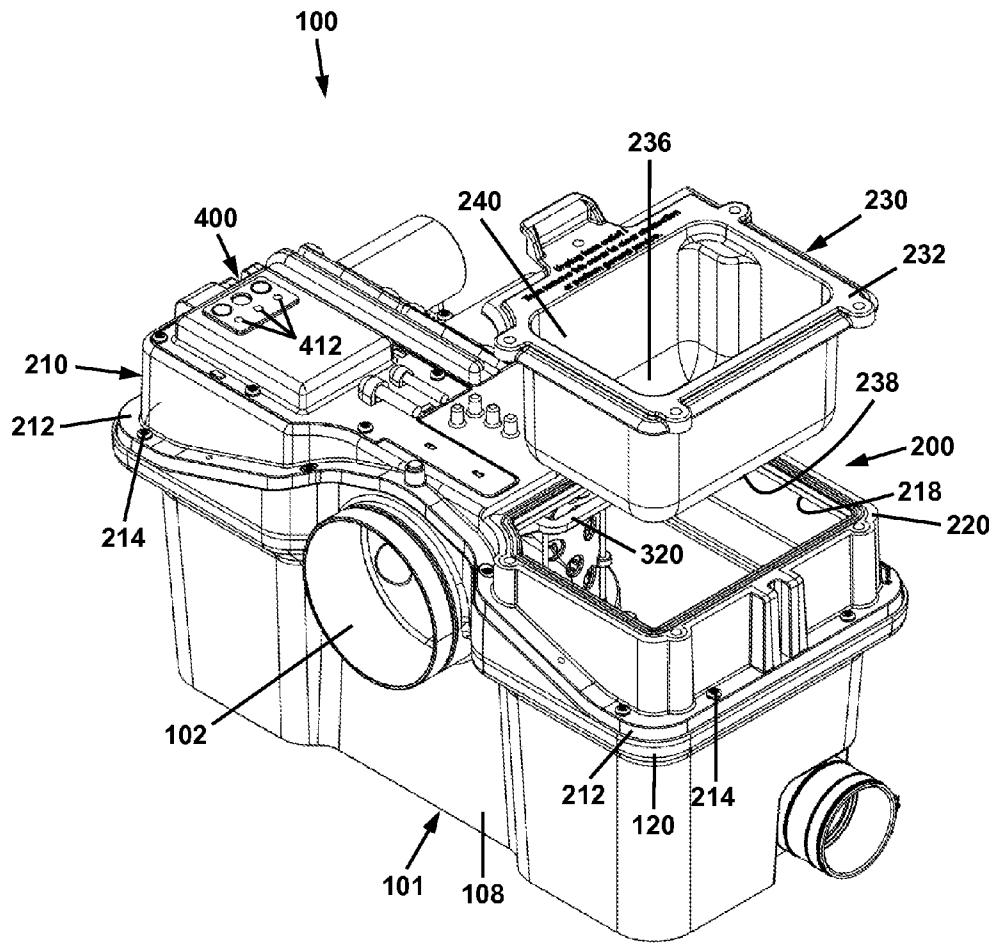


FIG. 3

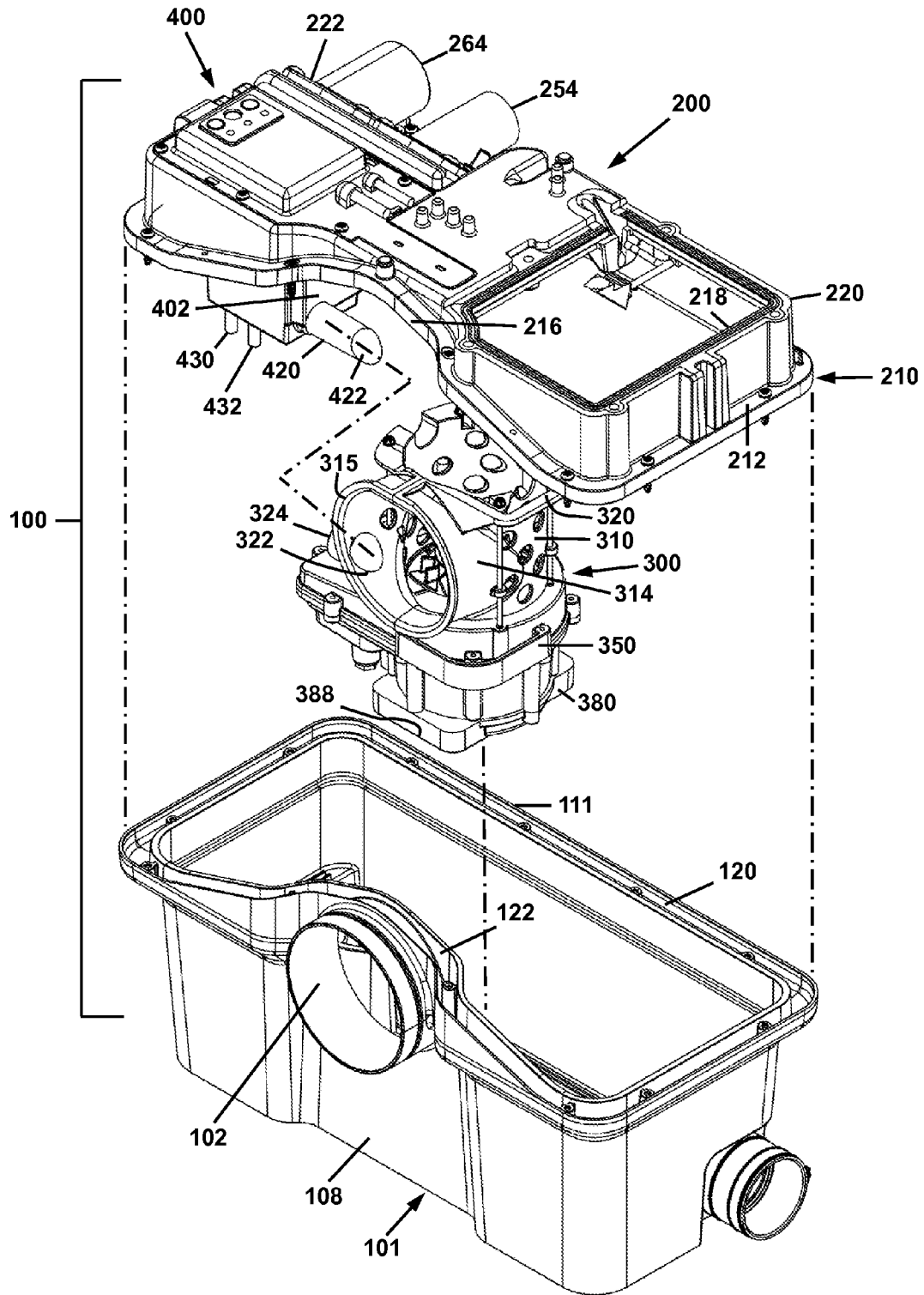


FIG. 4

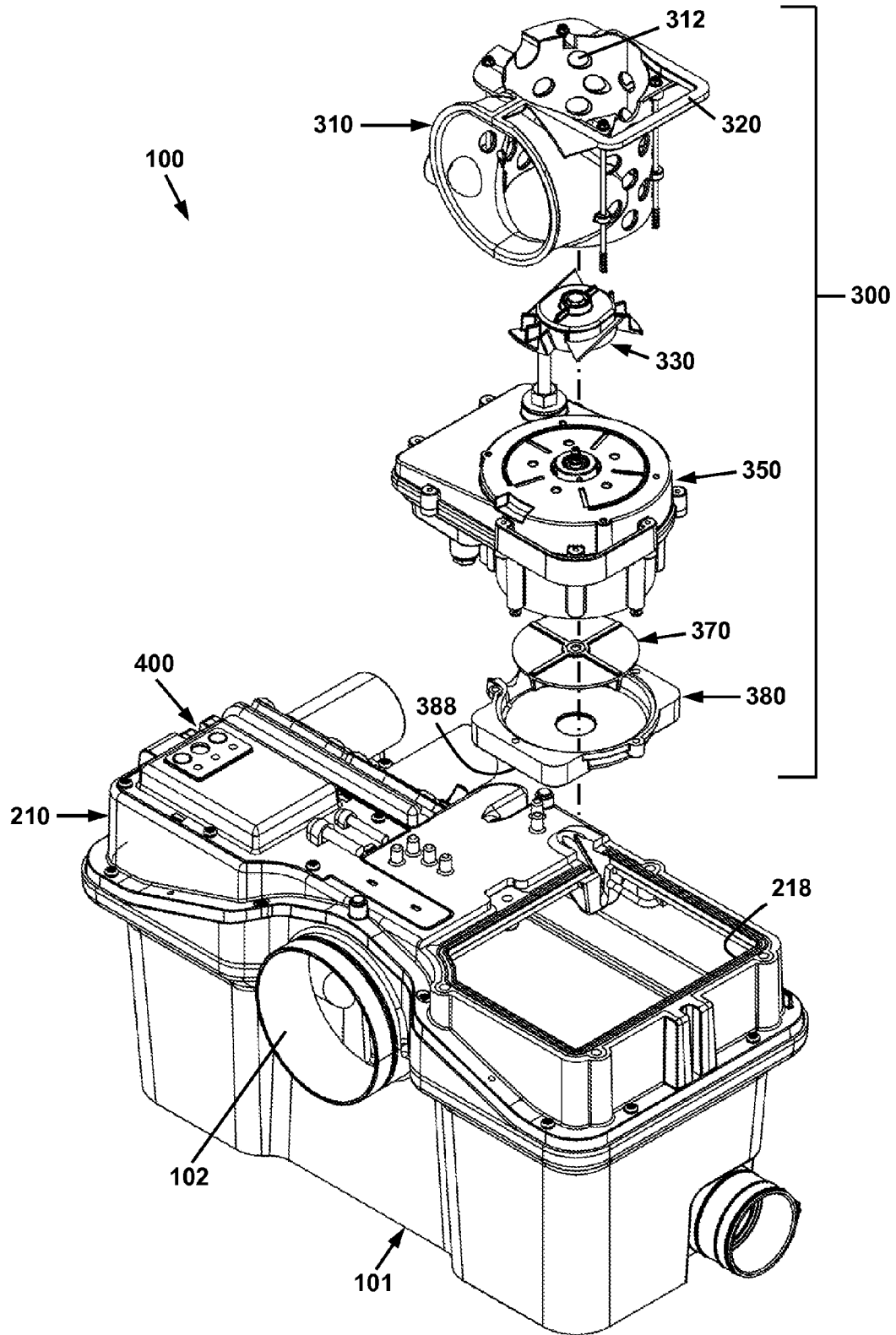


FIG. 5

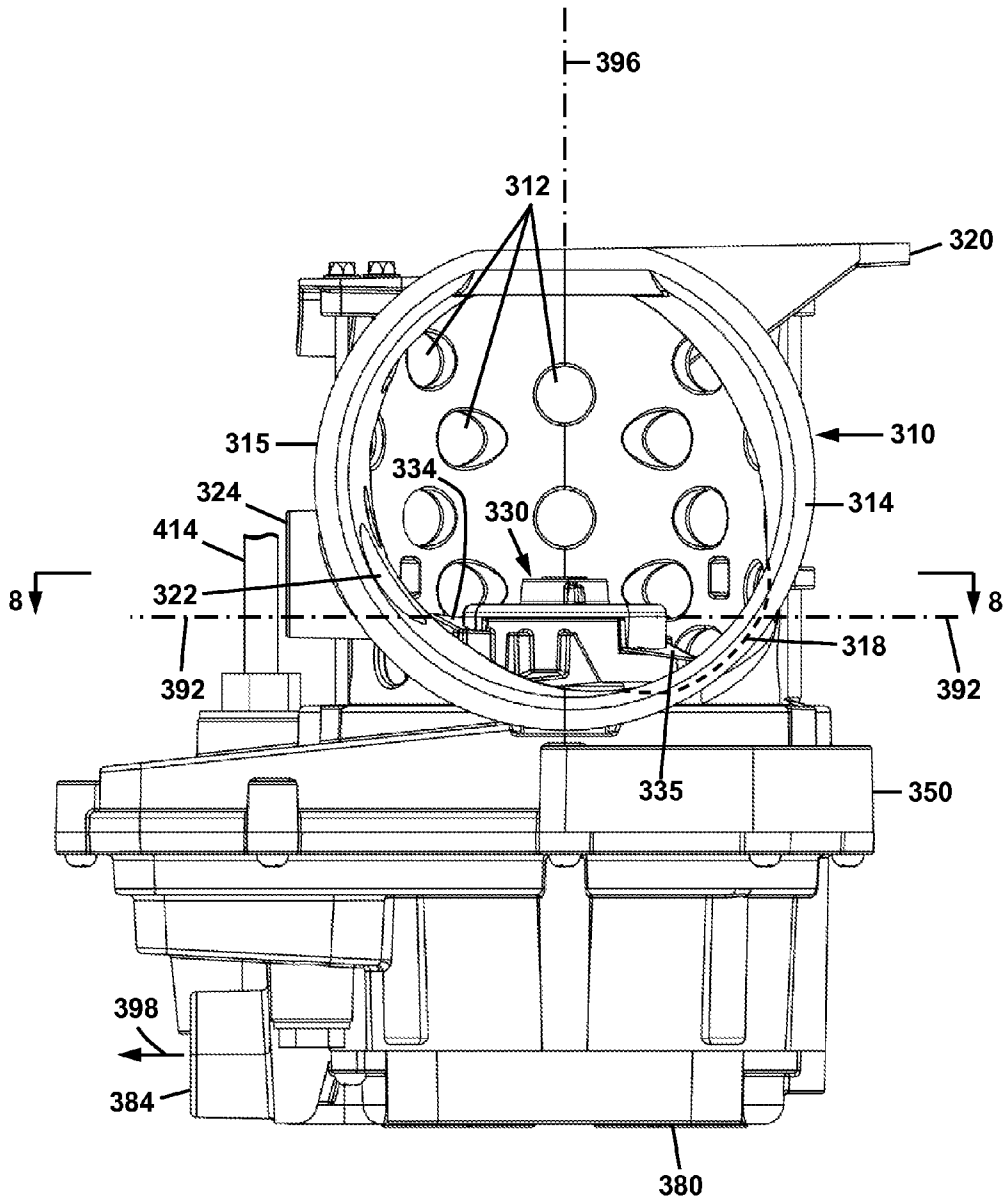


FIG. 6

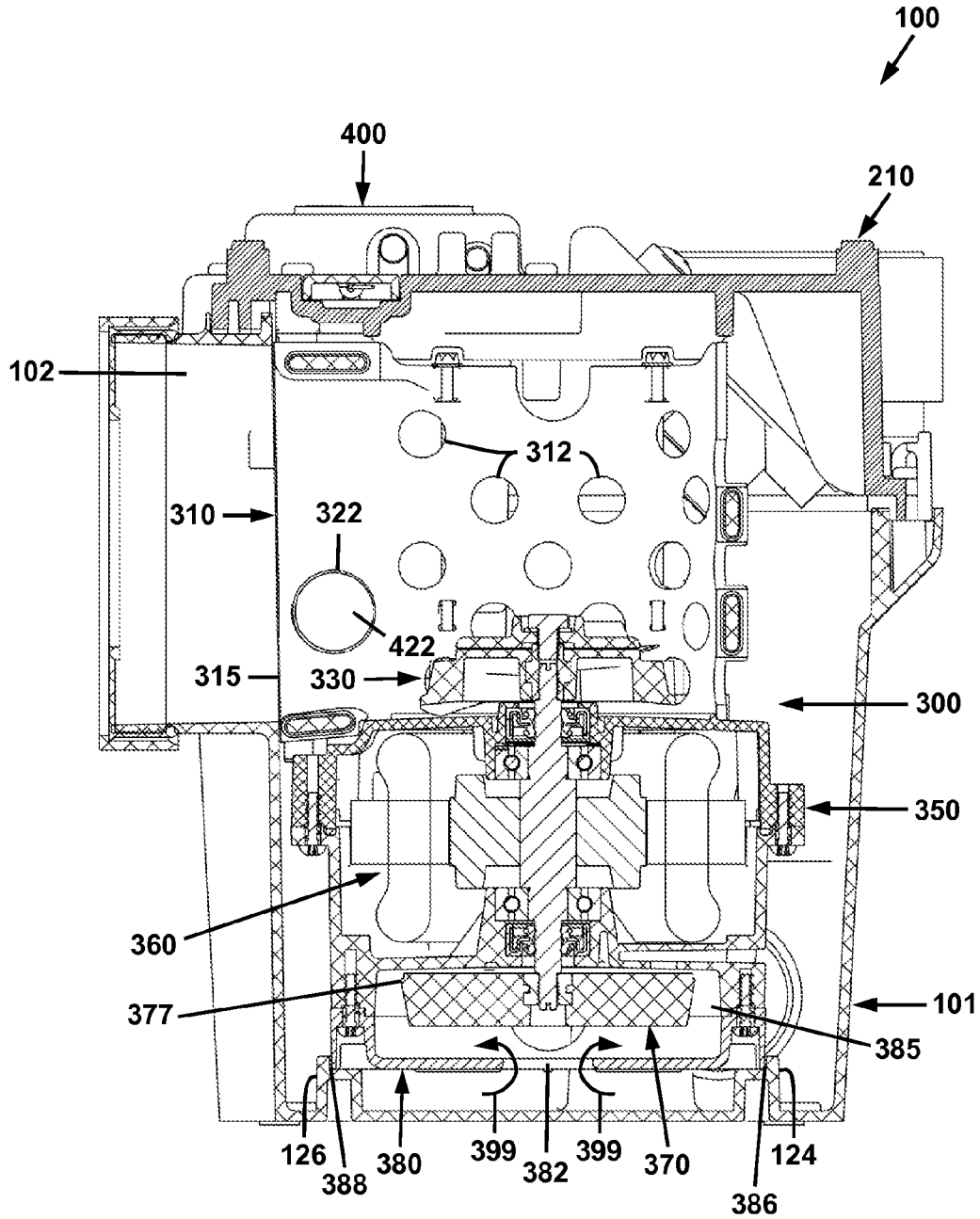


FIG. 7

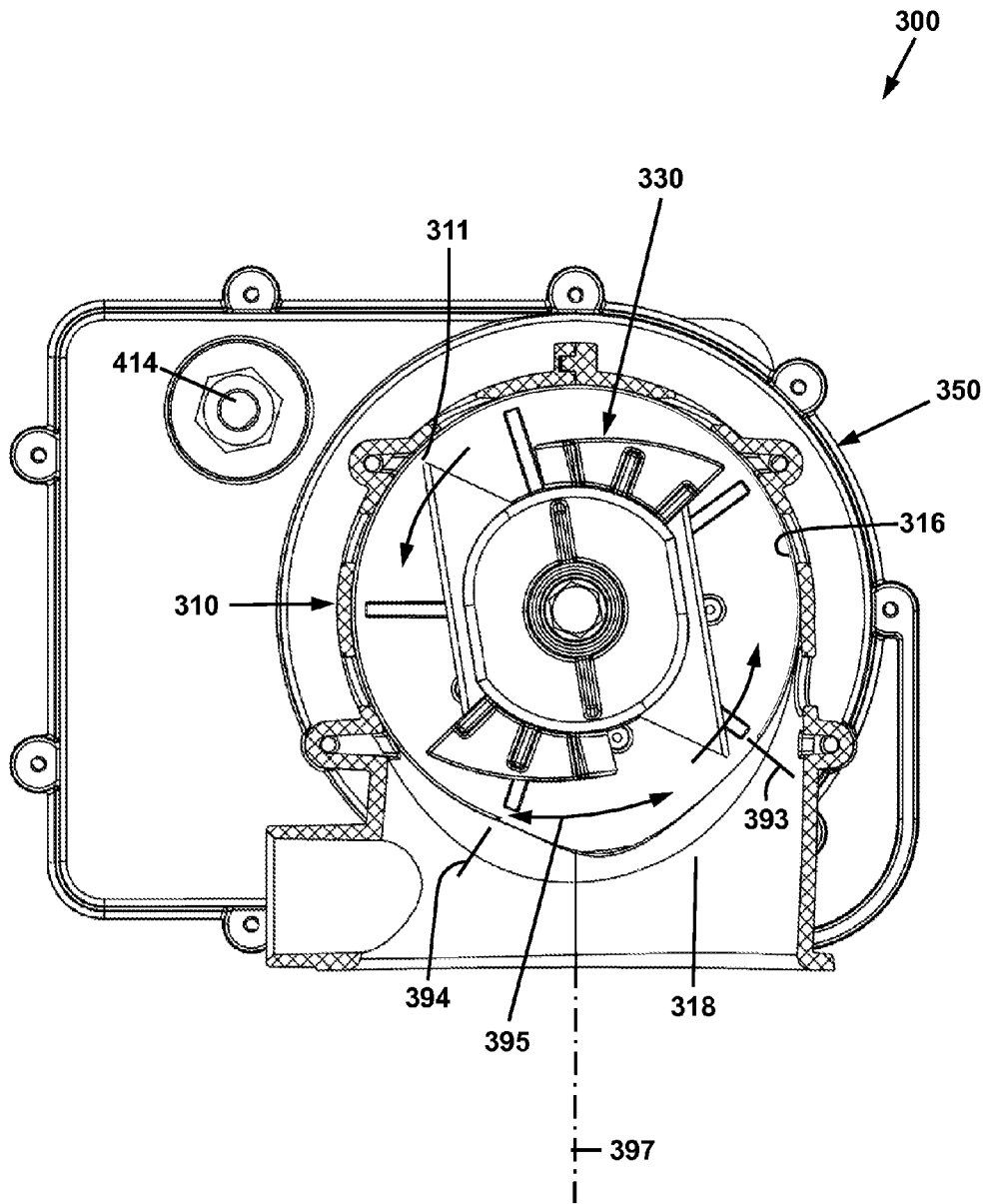


FIG. 8

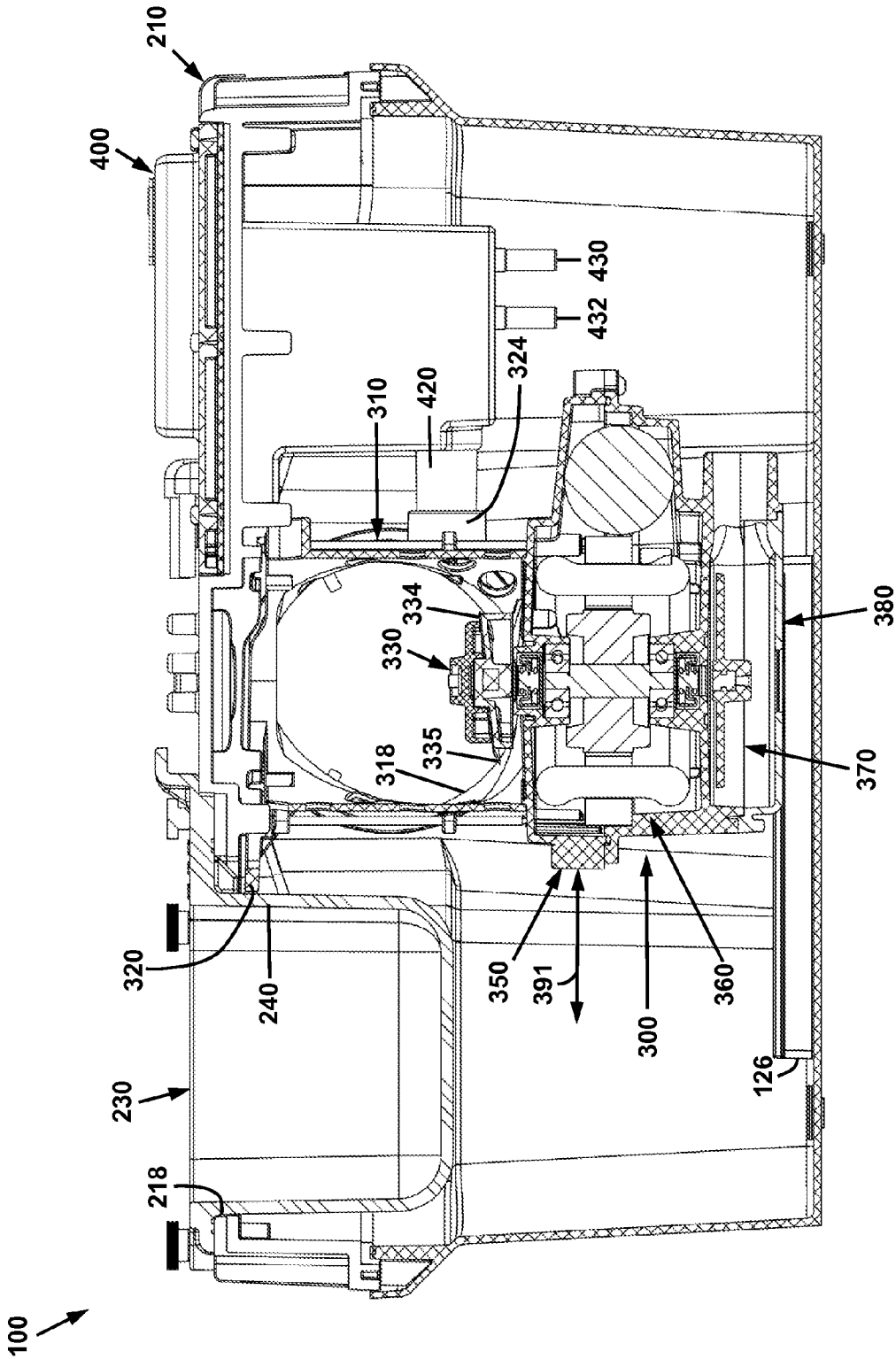


FIG. 9

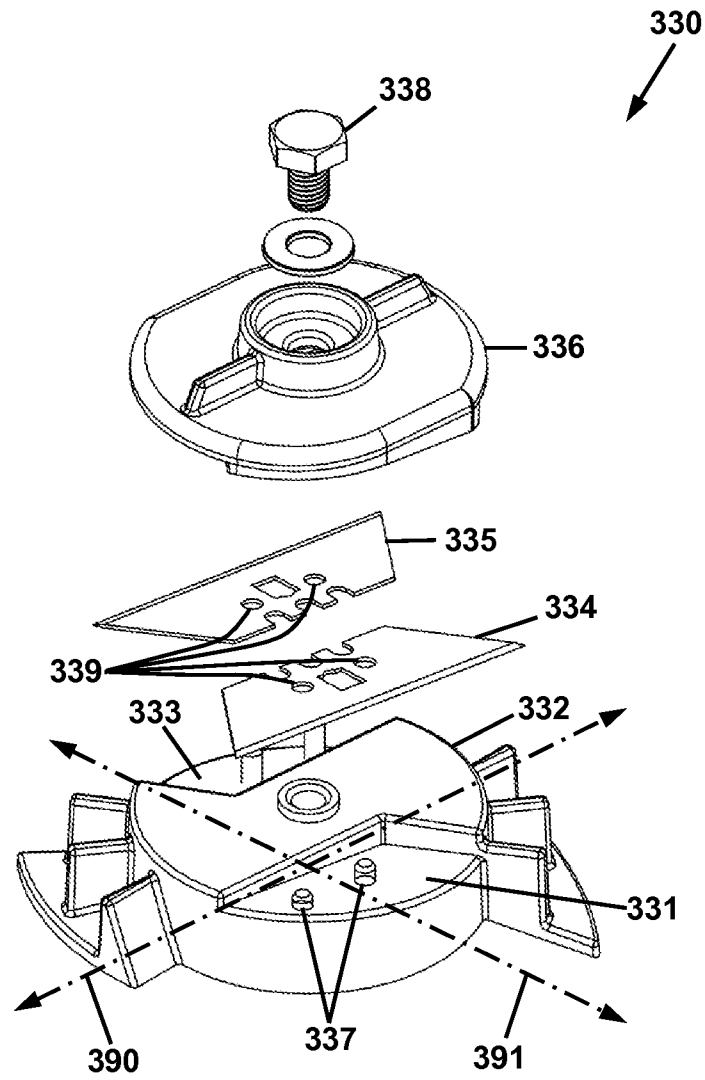


FIG. 10

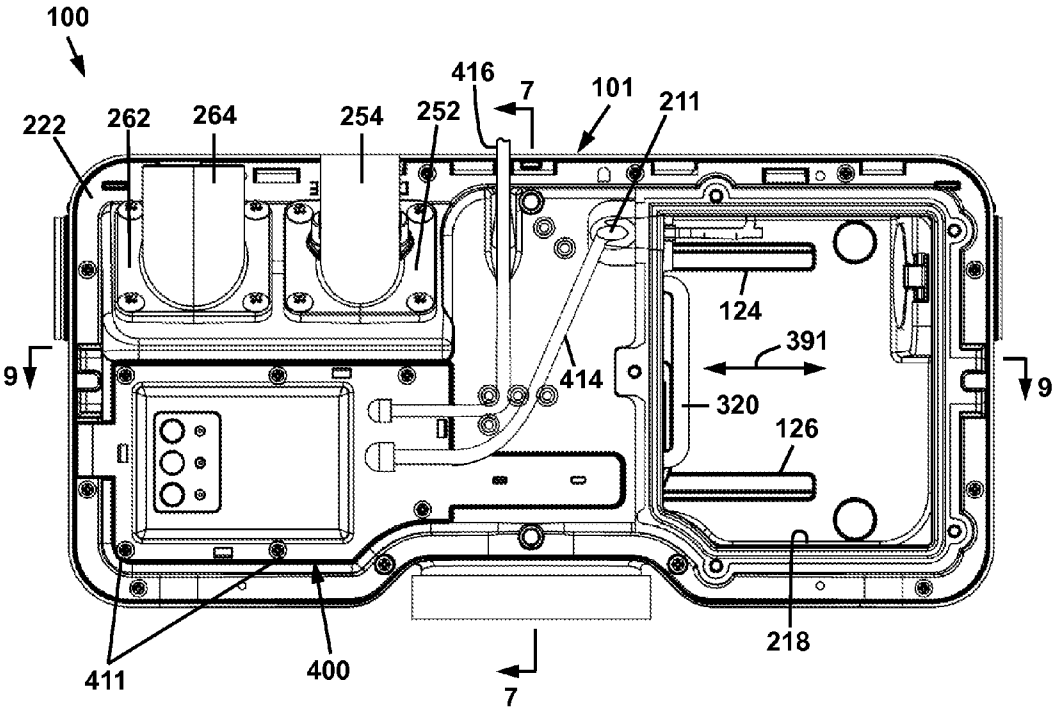


FIG. 11A

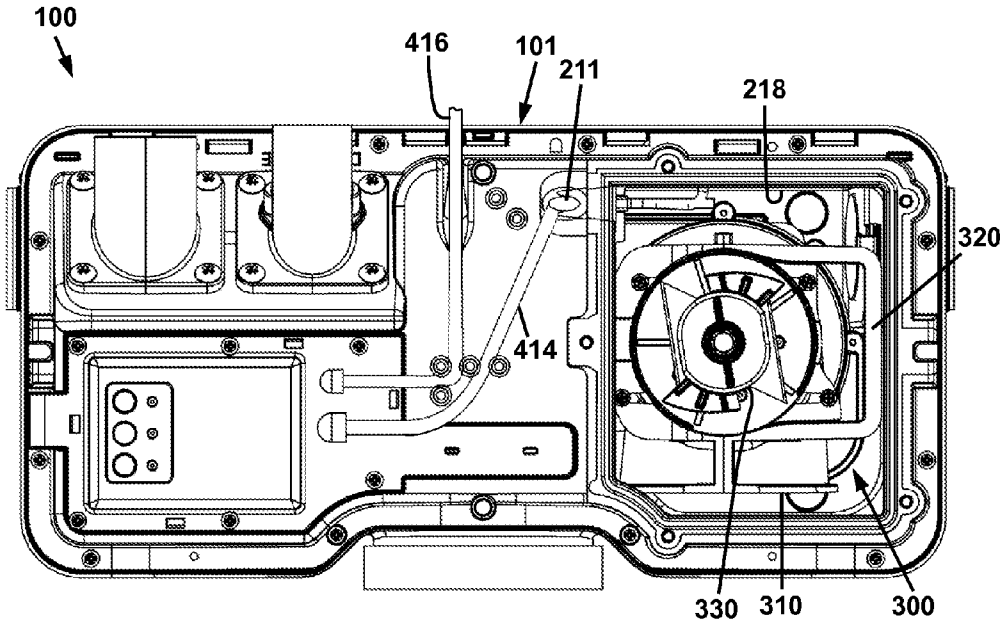


FIG. 11B

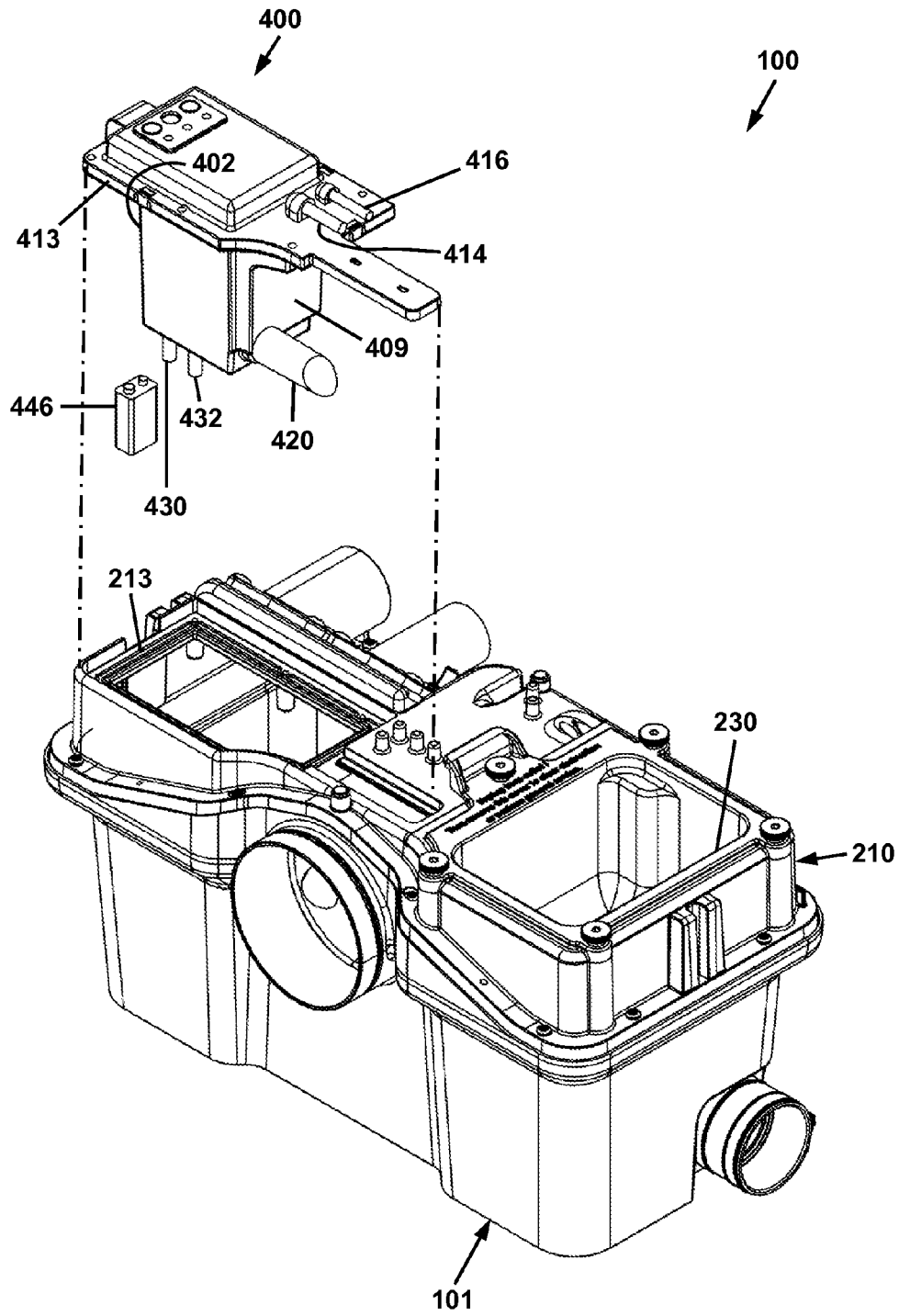


FIG. 12

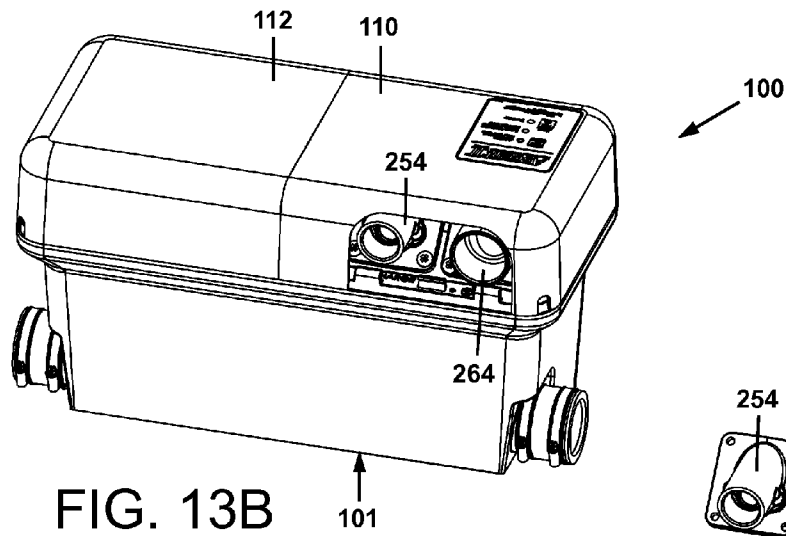
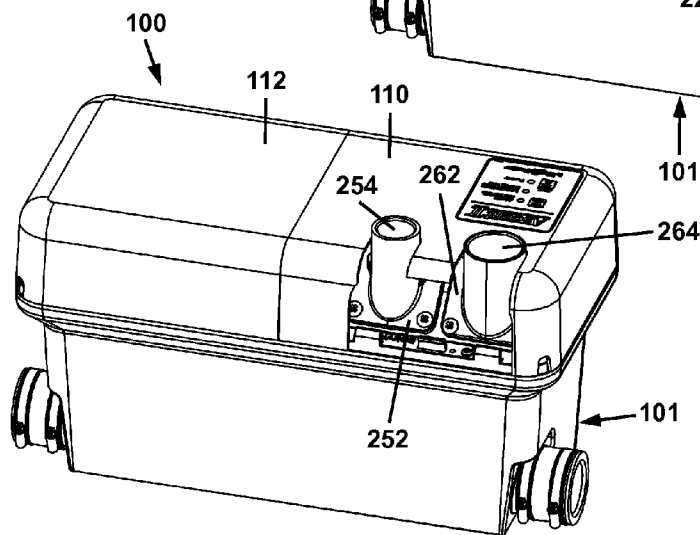
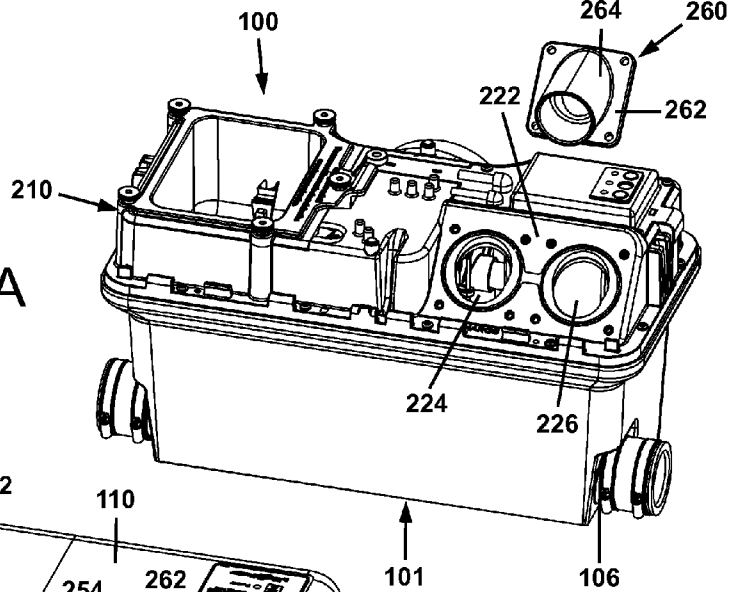


FIG. 13A



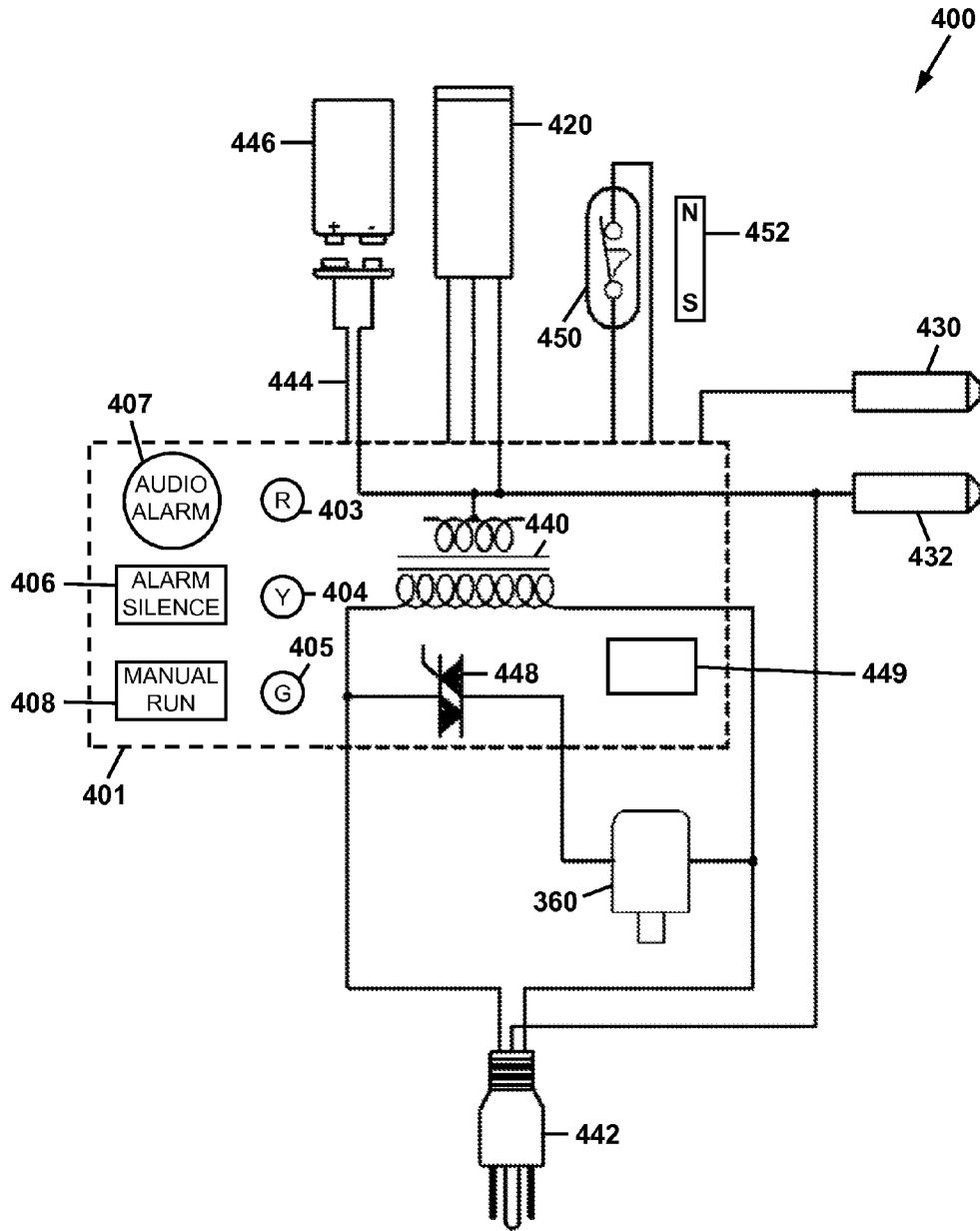


FIG. 14

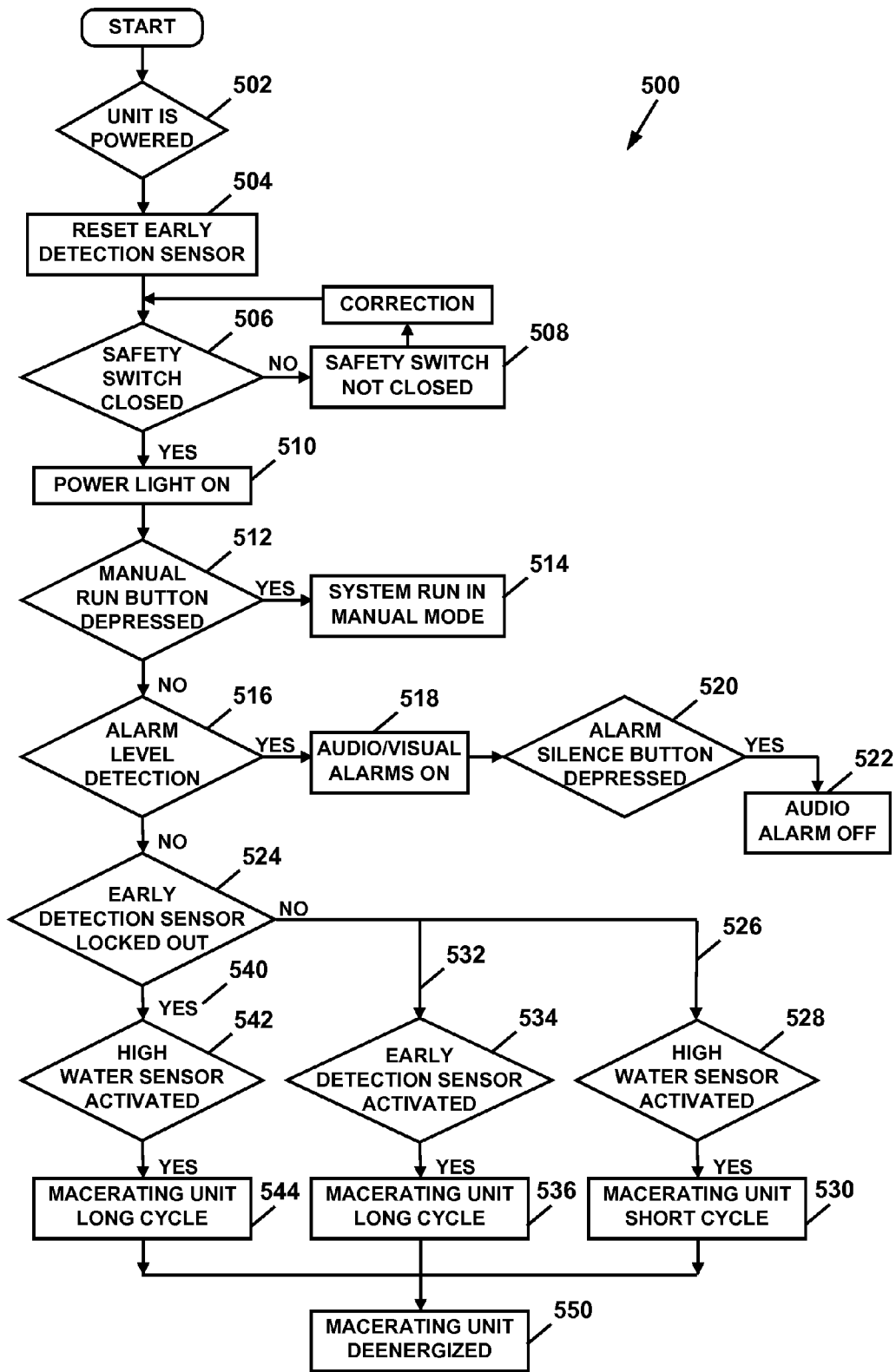


FIG. 15

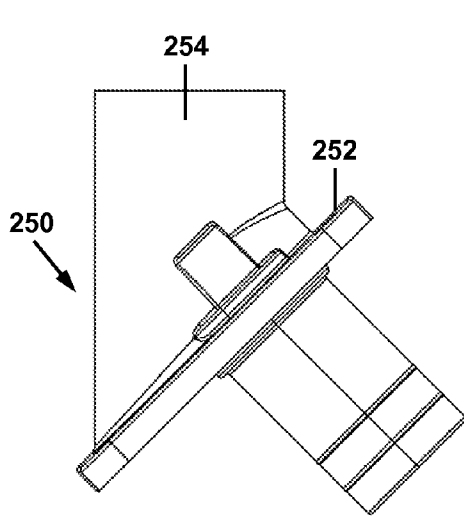


FIG. 16A

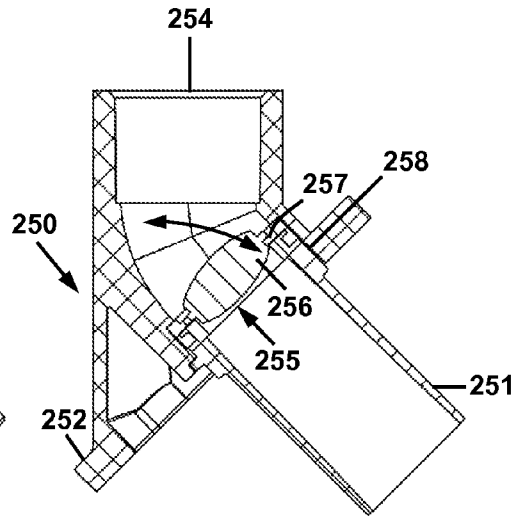


FIG. 16B

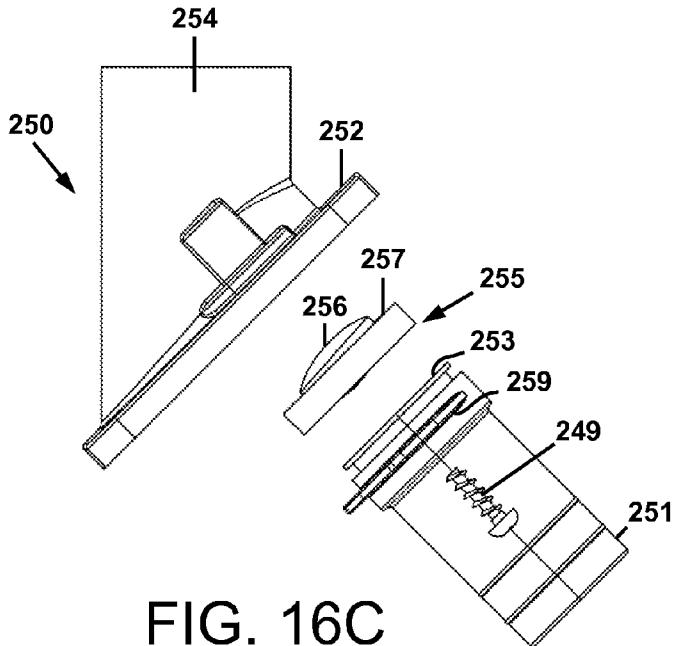


FIG. 16C

MACERATING APPARATUS AND METHOD**CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED PATENT APPLICATIONS**

This application is a continuation of copending U.S. patent application Ser. No. 13/027,878, filed on Feb. 15, 2011, the disclosure of which is incorporated herein by reference.

BACKGROUND**1. Field of the Invention**

Macerating toilet systems, which may be operated at a location below gravity drain piping, and which may also be installed without requiring connection to a drain pipe that is located below the surface upon which such a system is disposed.

2. Description of Related Art

Maceration, in sewage treatment, is the use of a machine that reduces solids to small pieces in order to deal with tissue paper, excrement, rags and other solid waste. Macerating toilets use a grinding or blending mechanism to reduce human waste to a slurry, which can then be moved by pumping. Such a toilet is useful in situations where the desired location of the toilet is below the location of gravity drain piping in a building, thus requiring the effluent from the toilet to be pumped upwardly to reach the discharge location of sewage piping from the building. Such a toilet is also useful because it may be configured so as to discharge laterally from its base, rather than from a discharge opening on the bottom of a base. This enables the toilet to be simply bolted in place to a supporting surface, and the water supply and effluent connections to be made to it, rather than breaking into the structure beneath the supporting surface to enable discharge from the toilet out its bottom. In circumstances where the installation of the toilet is "after the fact," and installation is desired that was otherwise unplanned, such as on a concrete basement floor (which may be reinforced with rebar), a toilet with a lateral discharge that can be connected directly to discharge piping is especially advantageous. It obviates the need to disrupt the floor or place the toilet upon a raised pedestal, which would otherwise be needed for a bottom discharge toilet. Breaking into a concrete floor is obviously difficult, and placing a toilet on a pedestal may be undesirable, such as if there is limited overhead clearance.

In circumstances requiring a horizontal or upward effluent discharge, a macerating toilet is required. This is because in both cases (or the combination of them), the effluent from the toilet must be pumped at least horizontally, and also possibly upwardly. However, such effluent contains tissue paper and excrement, and may also contain other solid waste such as rags, cigarette butts, sanitary napkins, and even unintended articles such as socks or other objects flushed down by inquisitive children.

In order for the effluent from the toilet to be pumped horizontally and/or upwardly, these articles must be ground completely into a liquid slurry that a pump can handle without jamming, breaking, or clogging. Thus a macerating apparatus is needed, either as a separate device upstream from the pump, or integrally provided as a part of the pump at the inlet thereof.

Toilets with a lateral discharge into a nearby enclosure are known. U.S. Pat. No. 7,203,976 to Weller, the disclosure of which is incorporated herein by reference, discloses a floor level pumping system that is non-disruptive to the existing

flooring and including a conventional rear outlet toilet. The system comprises a floor level tank for receiving waste and fluid from the outlet of the toilet including a tank chamber containing a designated area with a sensing system which activates a discharge pump when the level or quantity of the waste and fluid within the tank chamber reaches a predetermined level. The chamber further includes one or more baffles extending upwardly from a floor of the tank chamber, at least partially segregating the designated area from the remaining area of the tank chamber, and a discharge pump for pumping waste from the floor level tank out through a discharge pipe.

The placement of an enclosure with a macerator and a pump at the discharge of a toilet results in certain problems that are not otherwise present with a typical conventional bottom-discharge toilet. Some of these problems have not been solved by existing macerating toilet systems.

One problem is that because a macerating toilet with a pump and macerator device is more complex than a conventional bottom-discharge toilet, it requires more maintenance. Cutters on the macerator become worn and dull, and must be periodically replaced. The macerator system may have level and/or flow sensors which may become fouled and require cleaning or replacement. In a circumstance where a non-grindable solid object is flushed into the macerator, such as a small toy, it will jam the macerator. There is no alternative other than to access the macerator and remove the object. In all cases, because of the sewage present, accessing such components is an unsanitary and unpleasant task. In a typical prior art macerating apparatus, an entire top cover must be removed from the macerator tank to access the internal components. Piping connections must be dismantled from the pump contained in the tank, and level switches and/or other electrical sensing and control equipment must be disconnected and/or removed. All of this must be done in the presence of unsavory contents within the tank.

A second problem is that when certain level and/or flow sensors become fouled, they may provide a false signal such as a high level alarm. Even though the macerating unit and pump are in working order, the false alarm causes the entire toilet system to become inoperable such that it cannot be used. There are no provisions to communicate sensor condition to a user, while temporarily overriding the sensor output and maintaining operability of the toilet.

There is therefore a need for a macerating toilet that operates in a manner that avoids the need for maintenance to the greatest extent possible; but when maintenance is needed, which also enables such maintenance in as simple and sanitary a manner as possible.

SUMMARY

In accordance with the invention, a macerating apparatus for a toilet is provided in which the problem of unsanitary and/or difficult maintenance of the macerator on a macerating toilet is solved by providing a modular macerating unit that is easily moved to a convenient maintenance position, and if necessary, easily removed from the tank. In certain embodiments, the macerating apparatus may be comprised of a tank having an open top, a macerating unit disposed in the tank, and a main cover joined to the open top of the tank and comprising an opening. The macerating unit is movable from an operating position to a maintenance position beneath the opening. From the maintenance position, the macerating unit may be removed from the tank through the opening in the main cover. The apparatus may be further

comprised of an access cover fittable to the opening in the main cover and extending within the tank so as to hold the macerating unit in the operating position when the access cover is fitted to the main cover. The macerating unit may be laterally displaced from the operating position to the maintenance position when the access cover is removed from the main cover. The macerating unit may be disposed in a track on a bottom surface of the tank such that the track guides the motion of the macerating unit between the operating position and the maintenance position.

In further accordance with the invention, a macerating apparatus for a toilet is provided in which the problem of fouled sensors disrupting the operation of the macerating apparatus and the toilet is solved by providing an adaptive control system for operation of the apparatus. In certain embodiments, the macerating apparatus may be comprised of a macerating cutter disposed in a tank, and the adaptive control system in communication with the cutter. The system may comprise first and second sensors in communication with the controller, wherein when the first sensor detects a flushing of the toilet, the controller causes the cutter to operate for a first run time; and when the second sensor detects a level of liquid in the tank, the controller causes the cutter to operate for a second run time; and when the controller detects that the first sensor is inoperable and the second sensor detects the level of liquid in the tank, the controller causes the cutter to operate for the first run time. Because the flushing of a toilet detected by the first sensor typically contains solids which must be macerated, the first run time is preferably greater than the second run time, which typically only requires the pumping of gray water. In one embodiment of the apparatus, the cutter may be operatively connected to a motor, wherein the controller monitors the load of the cutter on the motor and varies the first run time depending upon the load on the cutter. The run time is increased for as long as necessary to fully macerate the solids, at which time the load on the motor decreases.

Another aspect of the Applicants' macerating apparatus is based on the observation of another problem with conventional macerating apparatus. The Applicants have observed that when certain solid objects, such as the aforementioned tissue paper, rags, cigarette butts, sanitary napkins, socks, etc., are present within the toilet or within the macerating tank upstream from the macerator and in an unmacerated state, when a flush is initiated, such objects are often drawn into the macerator before it can accelerate to operating speed, and cause the macerator to jam. In some instances, the cutters of the macerator do not even make a single rotation before jamming occurs against a solid object. Such jamming renders the macerator inoperable. The Applicants have observed that in a conventional macerator apparatus, the operating sensors are located in the macerating tank and programmed such that they do not trigger the macerating unit to start up until it is too late—until solid objects are at or near the macerating cutter.

The Applicants have hypothesized that if a macerator were allowed to reach operating speed before a solid object contacts it, the object would be macerated, taken in by the pump, and discharged in the desired routine manner. Subsequent experimental testing confirmed this hypothesis. In accordance with the invention, therefore, a macerating apparatus for a toilet is provided in which the problem of jamming the macerator at startup is solved by rapidly detecting the flushing of the toilet and accelerating the macerator before potentially motion jamming solid objects in the effluent from the toilet can reach it. The macerating apparatus may be comprised of a macerating cutter opera-

tively connected to a motor, and a sensor in communication with the motor. The sensor may detect the flow of effluent from the toilet toward the macerator, the flow of makeup water from the supply tank into the toilet, or the mechanical action of the actuator to flush the toilet. The sensor detects the toilet flushing at the beginning or early in the toilet flushing cycle, and causes the motor to start and operate the macerating cutter before the effluent containing solid objects contacts the macerating cutter. In certain embodiments, when effluent is discharged from the toilet toward the macerating unit, the sensor detects the discharge and causes the motor to start and operate the macerating cutter before the effluent contacts the macerating cutter. There is thus also provided a method of macerating an effluent stream from a toilet. The method comprises detecting flushing of the toilet that causes the effluent stream, and starting a macerating unit comprising a macerating cutter operatively connected to a motor and accelerating the macerating cutter to an operating speed prior to the effluent stream reaching the macerating cutter.

Another aspect of the Applicants' macerating apparatus is based on the observation of yet another problem with conventional macerating apparatus. The Applicants have observed that at the junction between an inlet tube and a macerating basket of a macerator, if a tight running clearance between a cutter blade tip and the basket or inlet tube is maintained, a relatively high frequency of jamming of solid objects between the macerator blade and the basket of inlet tube occurs. Such jamming renders the macerator inoperable.

The Applicants have hypothesized that if a larger blade tip running clearance were provided, with a gradual reduction in the running clearance, solid objects drawn into the gap between the macerator blade and the basket or inlet tube would be macerated, taken in by the pump, and discharged in the desired routine manner. Subsequent experimental testing confirmed this hypothesis. In accordance with the invention, therefore, a macerating apparatus for a toilet is provided in which the problem of jamming the macerator by solid objects is solved by providing a larger blade tip running clearance and a gradual reduction in the running clearance at the junction of the macerator basket and the inlet tube. In certain embodiments, the macerating apparatus may be comprised of a macerating cutter operatively connected to a motor and disposed within a macerating basket, and an asymmetric inlet tube joined to the macerating basket, which is configured to providing the larger blade tip running clearance and gradual reduction in the running clearance at the junction of the macerator basket and the inlet tube.

The intake basket may be comprised of a cylinder comprising a wall surrounding the cutter, with the inlet tube intersecting the wall of the cylinder. The cutter may be a rotary cutter with the cutting blade defining a plane of rotation, and wherein the asymmetry of the inlet tube is in a lower inward region of the inlet tube and in the plane of rotation of a cutting blade of the cutter. The asymmetry of the inlet tube may be biased toward the lower inward region of the inlet tube in the direction of rotation of the cutter. The increased operating clearance between the cutting blade of the macerating cutter and the intake basket may occur between about 50 and about 100 degrees of cutter rotation. This sector of rotation is biased relative to the inlet tube in the direction of rotation of the cutter, and aligns generally with the lower inward region of the inlet tube.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The present disclosure will be provided with reference to the following drawings, in which like numerals refer to like elements, and in which:

FIG. 1 is a front perspective view of the instant macerating apparatus connected to a toilet;

FIG. 2 is a front perspective view of the macerating apparatus in a first partially exploded state;

FIG. 3 is a front perspective view of the macerating apparatus in a second partially exploded state;

FIG. 4 is a front perspective view of the macerating apparatus in a third partially exploded state;

FIG. 5 is a front perspective view of the macerating apparatus in a fourth partially exploded state;

FIG. 6 is a front elevation view of the macerating unit of the macerating apparatus;

FIG. 7 is a side cross-sectional view of the macerating unit of FIG. 6 disposed within the tank of the macerating apparatus in an operational position, taken along line 7-7 of FIG. 11A;

FIG. 8 is a top cross-sectional view of the macerating unit of FIG. 6, taken along line 8-8 of FIG. 6;

FIG. 9 is a rear cross-sectional view of the macerating unit within the tank of the macerating apparatus in the operational position, taken along line 9-9 of FIG. 11A;

FIG. 10 is a detailed exploded view of one embodiment of a cutter cartridge of the macerating unit;

FIG. 11A is a first top view of the macerating apparatus with the decorative covers and an access cover removed, and with the macerating unit in an operational position;

FIG. 11B is a second top view of the macerating apparatus as shown in FIG. 8A, but with the macerating unit in a maintenance position;

FIG. 12 is a perspective view of the macerating apparatus in a fifth partially exploded state;

FIG. 13A is a rear perspective view of the macerating apparatus shown with piping connections disassembled from the apparatus;

FIG. 13B is a rear perspective view of the macerating apparatus shown with piping connections assembled with the apparatus in a first orientation;

FIG. 13C is a rear perspective view of the macerating apparatus shown with piping connections assembled with the apparatus in a second orientation;

FIG. 14 is a schematic diagram of electrical components and controls for certain embodiments of the Applicant's macerating apparatus;

FIG. 15 is an exemplary logic diagram of one mode of operation of the macerating apparatus; and

FIG. 16A-16C are illustrations of a liquid outlet fitting for discharging macerated slurry and gray water from the apparatus.

The present invention will be described in connection with certain preferred embodiments. However, it is to be understood that there is no intent to limit the invention to the embodiment described. On the contrary, the intent is to cover all alternatives, modifications, and equivalents as may be included within the spirit and scope of the invention as defined by the appended claims.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

For a general understanding of the present invention, reference is made to the drawings. In the drawings, like reference numerals have been used throughout to designate identical elements. In the following disclosure, the present

invention is described in the context of its use as a macerating apparatus for a toilet. However, it is not to be construed as being limited only to use in macerating the solids that may be present in an effluent stream from a toilet. The invention is adaptable to any use in which macerating of solids in a liquid stream is desirable to be provided from a macerating apparatus. Additionally, the description identifies certain components with the adjectives "front," "rear," "top," "upper," "bottom," "lower," "left," "right," etc. These adjectives are provided in the context of use of the macerating apparatus as connected to a toilet and in the context of the orientation of the drawings. The description is not to be construed as limiting the macerating apparatus to use solely in the spatial orientation shown herein. The instant macerating apparatus may be used in orientations other than those shown and described herein.

FIGS. 1 and 2 are perspective views of the instant macerating apparatus 100 connected to a toilet 10, and in a first partially exploded state, respectively. In certain embodiments, the apparatus 100 includes a tank 101, which may be connected at a first inlet port 102 to the effluent outlet 12 of the toilet 10. A length of pipe may be provided between the effluent outlet 12 of the toilet 10 and the tank 101 to permit the tank to be located behind a wall (not shown) adjacent to the toilet. The tank 101 may further include a second inlet port 104 and a third inlet port 106 (FIG. 10A). The first inlet port 102 is made sufficiently large and is positioned higher on the front wall 108 of the tank so as to match with the rear discharge port 12 of the toilet 10, and to pass the various solids contained in the liquid effluent that is discharged from the toilet 10. Gaskets 20 may be provided to seal the juncture between the inlet port 102 and the discharge port 12 of the toilet 10. One or both of the second and third ports 104 and 106 may be plugged. Alternatively, one or both of the second and third ports 104 and 106 may be connected to piping from sources of "gray water," by suitable means such as flexible pipe coupling 22 and hose clamps 24. Gray water sources may include sinks, bathtubs, showers, washing machines, and the like, wherein the effluent of such does not contain solids, and thus does not need maceration. Such solids-free effluent can simply be pumped out of tank 101 when a certain liquid level is reached therein.

The macerating apparatus may be provided with decorative removable covers 110 and 112, which provide a pleasing aesthetic appearance, while also providing isolation of the various components therebeneath. Cover 110 may include a window 114 for visibility of status indicating lights 412 (to be described subsequently herein) and a label 116 with indicia that correspond to the status lights 412. Covers 110 and 112 are easily removed by hand so as to provide simple access to the apparatus components beneath them.

Referring also to FIGS. 3 and 4, which are additional exploded perspective views, the apparatus 100 may be further comprised of a cover assembly 200 fittable to the open top 111 of tank 101, a macerating unit 300, and a control module 400. The cover assembly 200 is comprised of a main cover 210 and an access cover 230. The main cover 210 may be provided with a flange 212 around the lower perimeter thereof for sealing to a corresponding flange 120 provided on the open top 111 of tank 101. A gasket (not shown) may be disposed between the flanges 212 and 120, with the flanges being removably joined together by suitable fasteners 214. The front portion of the flange 212 may be formed with a riser section 216 which corresponds to the riser section 122 of the flange 120 of tank 101. These riser sections accommodate the provision of the intake port 102

at a high location on the tank wall **108** for a straight transition from the toilet outlet **12** into the intake screen of the macerating unit **300**.

The access cover **230** is fitted to an opening **218** in the main cover, and is provided with a flange **232** which corresponds with and seals to a flange **220** in the main cover **210**, in the same manner as described for main cover flange **212** and tank flange **120**. The access cover **230** is made easily removable from the main cover **210** by threaded fasteners **234**. Other quick-release fastening means such as e.g., clamps, quarter-turn fasteners, and the like are contemplated.

The access cover **230** is formed with a downwardly extending cavity **236** having a bottom wall **238** and side walls. The side wall **240** that is proximate to the macerating unit **300** serves the purpose of holding the macerating unit **300** in its operating position when the access cover **230** is joined to the main cover **210**, as will be explained in further detail herein. Alternatively, the access cover **230** could be provided as a simple flat cover with a downwardly extending portion that contacts the macerating unit **300** and retains it in its operating position.

Referring now to FIGS. 4-9, the macerating unit **300** is comprised of an intake basket **310**, a cutter cartridge **330**, a motor enclosure **350** containing a motor **360**, an impeller **370**, and a volute **380**. Referring also to FIG. 11A, the motor is provided with electrical power through a flexible cord **414** from the control module **400**, which in turn is supplied with electrical power through a cord **416**, which may include a plug (not shown) for connection to a wall socket (not shown). The cords **414** and **416** may be routed through and secured with pegs which protrude from the main cover **210**. The flexible cord **414** may be routed through a cord seal **211** that is similar to the cord seal disclosed in commonly owned U.S. Pat. No. 7,563,082, the disclosure of which is incorporated herein by reference. Referring also to FIG. 12, the control module **400** may be removably joined to a control opening **213** in the main cover. The control module **400** may include a flange **413** which is seated on a seal and joined by fasteners **411** to flange **413** in the main cover **210**, in a manner similar to that described previously for the access cover **230**. (It is noted that in FIG. 12, for the sake of simplicity of illustration, only a small portion of cords **414** and **416** are shown extending from the control module **400**.)

In operation, the motor **360**, intake basket **310**, and cutter cartridge **330** coact to macerate solid materials in the incoming liquid effluent stream from the toilet **10**. Simultaneously, the motor **360**, impeller **370**, and volute **380** coact to pump liquid slurry that has been macerated by the cutter cartridge **330**. Such slurry flows downwardly through holes **312** in the basket **310** to the bottom of the tank **101**, into the inlet **382** of the volute as indicated by arrows **399**, out through the outlet **384** of the volute **380** as indicated by arrow **398**, through a conduit (not shown) within the tank **101**, and out through an outlet fitting **254** (FIG. 13A).

Referring also to FIG. 10, the cutter cartridge **330** may be comprised of a base **332**, at least one cutter blade **334**, a cap **336**, and a fastener **338** which secures the cap **336** and the blade **334** to the base **332**. The rotary motion of cutter blade **334** defines a plane of rotation **392** (see also FIG. 6) denoted by orthogonal axes **390** and **391**. The base **332** and/or the cap **336** may be provided with a recess formed therein to receive the blade **334**, thus holding it firmly when in operation, thereby helping to prevent breakage thereof. In the embodiment depicted in FIG. 10, the cutter cartridge **330** is comprised of first and second cutter blades **334** and **335**. Other cutter configurations are contemplated, such as having more

than two blades, or a single blade having multiple cutting teeth extending radially therefrom in a star or saw tooth pattern. In one preferred embodiment, cutter blades **334** and **335** are identical, and are standardized trapezoid-shaped utility knife blades sold in retail hardware stores, thereby facilitating procurement of inexpensive replacement blades for the user of the apparatus. In the embodiment depicted in FIG. 10, the base **332** is provided with formed recesses **331** and **333** for receiving the cutter blades **334** and **335**. Pins **337** may be provided for engagement with holes **339** in the blades **334** and **335** to hold them securely in place. Referring to FIGS. 6, 9 and 10, the recesses **331** and **333** may be angled with respect to the plane of rotation **392**, such that the first and second cutter blades **334** and **335** mounted respectively thereupon are canted at an angle that is non-parallel to the plane of rotation **392**.

In certain embodiments, the macerating unit may be comprised of features that provide enhanced macerating capability. This is best understood with reference to FIGS. 6, 8, and 9. The Applicants have discovered how to provide enhanced macerating capability through observations and experimental trials. In one initial embodiment (not shown) of the macerating apparatus **100**, a cylindrical inlet tube was joined to a cylindrical intake basket in the macerating unit **300**, with the central axis **397** of the tube and the central axis **396** of the basket being substantially perpendicular to each other. In this configuration, the tips of the cutter blades were maintained at a relatively narrow clearance **311** with the inner wall **316** of the basket **310**, except for a small region indicated by arcuate bidirectional arrow **395** in FIG. 8. It was discovered that solid objects tended to jam one of the cutter blades **334** and **335** in this configuration, with a given solid object becoming jammed between the tip of the cutter blade and the inner wall **316** at the point where cutter tip-to-wall clearance decreased.

To solve this problem, an asymmetric inlet tube **314** in communication with the intake basket **310** was discovered to be effective. Rather than being cylindrical, the inlet tube **314** is asymmetric in that it has a biased opening in the lower region **318** thereof, in FIG. 8 between approximately the 7 o'clock position **394** and the 4 o'clock position **393**. Rather than being cylindrical, this region **318** extends further laterally as indicated by dotted line **318** in FIG. 6. In that manner, when the cutter blades **334** and **335** are rotating, the tip clearance with any nearby basket **310** and inlet tube **314** wall surfaces is increased near region **318**, i.e. from approximately the 7 o'clock position **394** to the 4 o'clock position **393** of FIG. 8, and a more gradual transition to the narrow tip-to-wall running clearance **311** occurs. Generally, an increased blade tip running clearance is desired over about 50 and about 100 degrees of cutter rotation near region **318**. The Applicants have discovered that with this configuration, the incidence of cutter jamming is greatly reduced, and the macerating cutter **330** is much more effective at slicing through solid objects that are carried by the liquid effluent from a toilet.

In certain embodiments of the Applicants' macerating apparatus, the problem of unsanitary and/or difficult maintenance of the macerator is solved by providing a modular macerating unit that is easily moved to a convenient maintenance position, and if necessary, easily removed from the toilet tank. Referring in particular to FIGS. 3, 4, and 9, the macerating apparatus **100** may be comprised of a tank **101** having an open top **111**, a macerating unit **300** disposed in the tank **101**, and a main cover **210** joined to the open top **111** of the tank **101**. The main cover **210** includes an opening **218** for access to the macerating unit **300** and other com-

ponents therein. Referring also to FIGS. 9, 11A, and 11B, the macerating unit 300 is movable as indicated by bidirectional arrow 391 between an operating position shown in FIGS. 9 and 11A, and a maintenance position shown in FIG. 11B. From the maintenance position, the macerating unit may be removed from the tank 101 through the opening 218 in the main cover 210.

Referring also to FIGS. 3-6, the macerating unit 300 may be provided with a handle 320 for the user to grasp in order to facilitate movement between the operating position and the maintenance position. The handle may be joined to the macerating unit 300 in the upper region thereof, such as to the intake basket 310. In this configuration, advantageously, the apparatus 100 may be further comprised of an access cover 230 fittable to the opening in the main cover 210 and extending downwardly within the tank 101. A downwardly extending portion of the access cover 230, such as cover wall 240 contacts the handle 320 (or another part of the macerating unit 300 similarly arranged), thereby holding the macerating unit 300 in its operating position when the access cover 230 is fitted to the main cover 210.

Additionally, referring also to FIG. 7, the macerating unit 300 may be disposed in a track on the bottom surface of the tank 101. The track may be comprised of first and second guide rails 124 and 126 which are joined to or integrally formed in the bottom of tank 101. The guide rails 124 and 126 may have L-shaped cross sectional shapes, which receive the lower corner edges 386 and 388 of the pump volute 380. In that manner, the guide rails 124 and 126 guide the motion of the macerating unit between the maintenance position and the operating position, and also coact with the access cover 230 in contact with the handle 320 to firmly hold the macerating unit 300 in its operating position during operation, and particularly during startup, when high torque loads on the macerating unit 300 occur.

In addition to providing a macerating unit 300 with an inlet basket configured to avoid jamming of the cutter cartridge 330 with solid objects, in certain embodiments, the macerating apparatus 100 is provided wherein the aforementioned problem of jamming the macerator at startup is solved by rapidly detecting the flushing of the toilet and accelerating the macerator before potentially motion jamming solid objects in the effluent from the toilet can reach it.

The macerating apparatus 100 may be comprised of a macerating cutter operatively connected to a motor, and a sensor in communication with the motor. The sensor may detect the flow of effluent from the toilet toward the macerator, the flow of makeup water from the supply tank into the toilet, or the mechanical action of the mechanism used to flush the toilet. The sensor detects the toilet flushing at the beginning or early in the toilet flushing cycle and causes the motor to start and operate the macerating cutter before the effluent containing solid objects contacts the macerating cutter.

In one embodiment depicted in FIGS. 4, 7, and 9, a sensor 420 may be provided in the intake basket 310 of the cutting cartridge. The sensor 420 may be located as far upstream in the basket 310 as possible, i.e. toward the outer edge 315 of the inlet tube 314. A port 322 may be provided in the inlet tube 314 for the sensor to extend through so as to contact the solids-containing liquid effluent that flows when the toilet is flushed. The port 322 may be provided with a fitting 324 for securely receiving and guiding the fitting to its operating location. The port 322 is preferably located toward the bottom of the inlet tube 314. In that manner, even if a toilet flush does not result in a fully flooded inlet tube 314, and the inlet tube 314 is less than half full, the sensor 420 will still

be flooded during the start of flush and detect the start of flush. The tip 422 of the sensor 420 may be beveled to conform to the shape of the inner wall of the inlet tube 314, so as to not obstruct the inlet tube 314 and cause solids to accumulate there.

The sensor 420 may be a capacitance sensor, which detects a change in capacitance when flooded with effluent, and then again when the effluent recedes. Alternatively, the sensor 420 may sense conductivity, flow, pressure, or any other physical property that varies when the inlet tube 314 is flooded with effluent and then recedes. Referring to FIGS. 4 and 9, the sensor 420 may be integrated into a control module 400, and extend into the inlet tube 314 from a wall 409 of a housing 402 of the module 400. In another embodiment (not shown), the sensor 420 may be joined to a cable that extends through the port 322 in the inlet tube 314, and forwardly past the outer edge 315 of the inlet tube 314 into the pipe coupling to the toilet 10 or into the outlet from the toilet 10. In that manner, the sensor 420 is placed even further upstream for early flush detection.

Other means for rapidly detecting the flushing of the toilet 10 may be provided instead of the sensor 420. In one embodiment (not shown), a sensor may be provided which detects the flow of makeup water from the supply tank 14 (FIG. 1) into the toilet 10, or the initial drop in level of makeup water in the supply tank when a flush is started. In another embodiment (not shown), a sensor may be provided which detects the motion of the flapper valve in the supply tank 14 (FIG. 1) into the toilet 10. The sensor may be, for example, an accelerometer sensor on the flapper valve or on the chain from the flush handle to the flapper valve, or a load cell on the chain from the flush handle to the flapper valve. In another embodiment (not shown), a sensor may be provided which detects the motion of the toilet flush handle on the supply tank 14 (FIG. 1), such as a tilt switch on the flush handle or the internal toilet flush rod. In another embodiment (not shown), a sensor may be provided which detects the sound or vibration from water turbulence or another noise associated with the flushing of the toilet 10. Any of these sensors may be in direct hardwired communication with the control module 400, or they may be provided with wireless communication to control module 400.

The use of the Applicants' macerating apparatus comprising means for detecting flushing of the toilet before effluent discharged from the toilet contacts the macerating cutter enables a method of macerating an effluent stream from a toilet. The method comprises detecting flushing of the toilet 10 that causes the effluent stream, and starting a macerating unit 300 comprising a macerating cutter 330 operatively connected to a motor 360, and accelerating the macerating cutter 330 using suitable means such as motor 360, to an operating speed prior to the effluent stream reaching the macerating cutter 330. As used herein, "rapidly detecting the flushing of the toilet" means detecting the flushing sufficiently early so as to accelerate the macerating cutter 330 to a sufficient operating speed that prevents jamming of the cutter with solid objects in the effluent stream. The amount of time needed to accelerate the cutter to a sufficient operating speed before solid objects arrive (i.e. how much in advance the flush must be detected before solid objects arrive at the cutter blades) varies depending upon the horsepower of the motor and its acceleration capability, the configuration of the cutter, the sharpness of the cutter blades, and the configuration of the toilet and flush tank. However, based upon experimental data for one embodiment of the apparatus 100, detecting the flushing and triggering the

motor to start at least about 0.5 second in advance of solid objects arriving at the cutter blades has been found to be effective in a macerating unit **300** having a 0.5 horsepower motor and a cutter cartridge **330** as shown in FIGS. **8** and **10** and described herein.

The macerating apparatus **100** may be provided with multiple sensors for control of the macerating unit **300**. Referring to FIGS. **4**, **12**, and **14**, an additional sensor **430** may be provided. The sensor **430** detects the presence of liquid in the tank **101**. A second sensor (not shown) may be provided as a backup sensor. The sensor **430** may be a conductivity sensor, which is referenced to a ground electrode **432**. The sensor **430** and ground electrode **432** may be integrated into the housing **402** of the control module **400**, extending downwardly as shown, or laterally therefrom. The macerating apparatus may have two modes of automatic operation. In the first mode, gray water may enter the tank **101** through one or both of the second and third ports **104** and **106** (FIG. **13A**), causing the level of liquid in the tank **101** to rise. When the level reaches sensor **430** and is detected, the motor **360** is started, and the pump (impeller **370** and volute **380**) act to pump the liquid out of the tank **101**. In the second mode, when the sensor **420** or other early flush detection means detects the flush of the toilet, the motor **360** is started, and the macerating intake basket **310** and cartridge **330** act to macerate any solids contained in the effluent from the toilet. Simultaneously, the liquid slurry in the tank **101** is pumped out by impeller **370** and volute **380**.

Given the content of the effluent stream from the toilet, and the content of the macerated slurry within the tank **101**, sometimes one of the sensors in a macerating apparatus may become fouled, and disrupt the operation of the apparatus. A malfunctioning sensor can cause the apparatus to become inoperable, and thus the toilet connected to it to become inoperable. To solve the problem of fouled sensors disrupting macerator operation, the Applicants' macerating apparatus **100** may be provided with an adaptive control system. Referring again to FIG. **14**, the control module **400** may include a circuit board **401** which contains process control circuits (not shown), status indicators such as an audio, i.e., audible alarm **407**, red, yellow, and green indicator lights **403**, **404**, and **405**, an alarm silence button **406**, and a manual run button **408**. The control module **400** may also include a transformer/converter **440** which drops the standard AC line voltage supplied through plug **442** to 5 volts DC for powering the various sensors and the control electronics, a connector **444** for connection to a backup battery **446**, a triac **448** for controlling voltage to the pump/macerator motor **360**, and a central processing unit **449** for integrating all of the control functions in one processor. For safety, a shutoff switch, such as a magnetically operated reed switch **450** may be provided, with a magnet attached to the removable cover **110**, such that if the removable cover **110** is removed, the apparatus **100** is shut down. One function of the yellow alarm light **404** may be to warn of a low backup battery voltage.

Referring now to FIG. **15**, one example of the operation **500** of the apparatus **100** with adaptive controls is shown. The operation **500** shown is to be as exemplary, with other alternatives being suitable. When the apparatus **100** is first started up, and line voltage is applied **502** through plug **442**, the control module **400** resets **504** the early flush detection sensor **420**. The safety switch **450** is confirmed as being closed, i.e. the protective cover **110** is present. If the safety switch **450** is not closed **508**, the condition must be corrected for the apparatus **100** to operate. The power (green) light **405** is illuminated **510**.

At this point, the apparatus may be operated manually by pressing **512** the manual run button **408**, such as for a startup check or for diagnostic purposes. In this mode, the motor **360** will run **514** for as long as the run button **408** is depressed, or until a thermal overload (not shown) or other safety circuit in the motor **360** shuts it down. During ongoing operation of the apparatus **100**, the alarm level sensor **430** is checked **516** for an alarm condition, such as the sensor **430** having detected a high liquid level condition for more than a predetermined length of time, which would indicate a malfunction of the apparatus **100**. In one exemplary embodiment, the length of time is about 7 seconds. If an alarm condition is present, the audible alarm **407** is sounded and/or the warning (red) light **403** is illuminated **518**. For the convenience of a user, the audible alarm **402** may be silenced **522** by depressing the alarm silence button **406**.

Also during ongoing operation of the apparatus **100**, the early flush detection sensor **420** is checked to confirm that it is operable. If the sensor **420** is operable, in the aforementioned first mode **526** of operation, if the high water sensor **430** is actuated **528**, such as by an inflow of gray water as described previously, the pump motor **360** is actuated **530** for a short time, such as about 5 seconds, thereby discharging the contents of the tank **101**. A relatively short run time is sufficient, since the gray water contains no solids, and no work is being done by the macerating cartridge to cut solids. At the end of the run time, the pump motor **360** is deenergized **550**.

With the sensor **420** being confirmed as operable, in the aforementioned second mode **532** of operation, if the sensor **420** detects **534** a flush of the toilet **10**, the pump/macerator motor **360** is actuated **536** for a longer time, such as about 10 seconds. The longer time as compared to the first mode of operation is necessary to ensure that all solids that enter the macerating intake basket **310** are fully macerated by the macerating cutter **330** into a slurry that can be handled by the pump impeller **370** and volute **380**. At the end of the run time, the pump motor **360** is deenergized **550**. In one embodiment of the apparatus **100**, the control module **400** monitors the load of the cutter on the motor and varies the run time depending upon the load on the cutter. The run time is increased for as long as necessary to fully macerate the solids, at which time the load on the motor decreases. The load on the motor may be monitored by a measurement of the current draw of the motor, or by a torque sensor (not shown) on the motor.

However, in the event that the sensor **420** is detected as being fouled and inoperable **540**, the control module **400** adapts the operation of the apparatus **100** to keep it running. With a non-functional sensor condition **540**, if the high water sensor is activated **542**, this condition may be caused either by an inflow of gray water as described previously, or by an inflow of liquid resulting from a flush of the toilet, wherein some water is filtered through the holes **312** in the intake basket **310**. The control module **400** is thus programmed to adapt, and to operate **544** the motor **360** in the macerating mode for the longer time duration.

In the event that a jam of a cutter blade against a solid object in the intake basket occurs, and rotation of the motor **360** is halted, the control module **400** detects this condition and shuts the motor down, while illuminating the jam alarm (red) light **403**. Alternatively, circuitry (not shown) may be provided to reverse the direction of rotation of the macerating cutter **330** in order to clear the jam, and to then restore the proper rotation of the cutter **330**, and continue the maceration of the solids. In the event that the jam does not

clear after a predetermined number of attempts to clear it, the motor **360** may be shut down, and the jam alarm light **403** illuminated.

The Applicants' macerating apparatus may also be provided with improved fittings for connections to an effluent discharge pipe and to a venting pipe. Referring to FIGS. **4**, **11A**, and **13A**, the main cover of the apparatus may be provided with a surface **222** which is formed in the main cover **210** at about a 45 degree angle from vertical and horizontal. A first fitting **250** for conveying discharged effluent from the apparatus **100**, and a second fitting **260** for venting vapors and odors from the apparatus **100** are also provided. Fitting **250** is comprised of a flange **252** and a pipe stub **254** extending from the flange **252** (or formed as an arcuate elbow) at a 45 degree angle with the plane of the flange **252**. In like manner, fitting **260** is comprised of a flange **262** and a pipe stub **264** extending from the flange **262** at a 45 degree angle with the plane of the flange **262**.

The fitting **250** may be joined to the surface **222** in communication with the effluent outlet port **224**, and the fitting **260** may be joined to the surface **222** in communication with the vent port **226** by suitable fasteners (not shown). Referring to FIG. **13B**, in a first configuration, the fittings **250** and **260** may be joined to the surface **222** of the cover **210** such that they are directed horizontally, and may be connected to horizontal piping runs (not shown) that may pass through a nearby wall (not shown). Referring to FIG. **13C**, in a second configuration, the fittings **250** and **260** may be joined to the surface **222** of the cover **210** such that they are directed vertically (with the decorative/protective cover **110** being notched for clearance), and may be connected to vertical piping runs (not shown) that may pass through a nearby ceiling (not shown). Thus by configuring the outlet fittings **250** and **260** in combination with the main cover **210** in this manner, considerable installation flexibility is provided to suit the user's needs.

The effluent outlet fitting **250** may be provided with a check valve, so that in the event that the apparatus **100** requires service, the outlet fitting **250** may be removed from the main cover without any backflow and leakage of the contents in the piping connected to the outlet fitting **250**. Referring to FIGS. **16A-16C**, the check valve **255** may be disposed in the upper end of a pipe stub **251**. The check valve **255** may be comprised of a flapper **256** integrally formed with a sealing lip **257**, which in turn fits over the end **253** of the pipe stub **251**. The flapper **256** pivots to permit outward flow through the fitting **250**, but seats on the sealing lip **257** to prevent back flow through the pipe stub **251** and onward into the tank **101** of the apparatus **100**, or, undesirably, elsewhere if the outlet fitting **250** is removed from the apparatus **100**. The check valve **255** and upper end **253** of the pipe stub **251** may be disposed in a recess **258** in the flange **252**. The pipe stub **251** may also be provided with a flange **259** for joining to the fitting flange **252** with suitable fasteners **249**. The pipe stub **251** is connected to the outlet **384** of the pump volute **380** by a length of conduit (not shown). The conduit is preferable flexible conduit so as to facilitate removal of the macerating unit **300** as described previously. In an alternative configuration, the effluent outlet port **224** may be provided with a check valve **255** in a similar manner, although this is less desirable because it does not prevent backflow and leakage of the contents in the piping connected to the outlet fitting **250** when the outlet fitting **250** is disconnected from the main cover **210**.

It is, therefore, apparent that there has been provided, in accordance with the present invention, a macerating apparatus and method for macerating solid objects in a liquid

stream. The macerating apparatus and method are useful for macerating the effluent stream of a toilet. Having thus described the basic concept of the invention, it will be rather apparent to those skilled in the art that the foregoing detailed disclosure is intended to be presented by way of example only, and is not limiting. Various alterations, improvements, and modifications will occur and are intended to those skilled in the art, though not expressly stated herein. These alterations, improvements, and modifications are intended to be suggested hereby, and are within the spirit and scope of the invention. Additionally, the recited order of processing elements or sequences, or the use of numbers, letters, or other designations therefore, is not intended to limit the claimed processes to any order except as may be specified in the claims.

We claim:

1. A macerating apparatus comprising:

- a) a tank having an open top, and comprising a side wall and a bottom wall defining a tank volume;
- b) a macerating unit disposed within the tank volume and comprised of an intake basket comprising a side wall including an inner side wall surface defining a basket interior and an outer side wall surface defining a portion of the tank volume exterior to the basket, the side wall including at least one open hole therethrough providing fluid communication between fluid contained within the basket interior and in contact with the inner side wall surface of the intake basket, and fluid contained in the portion of the tank volume exterior to the basket and in contact with the outer side wall surface of the intake basket;
- c) a main cover removably joined to the open top of the tank and comprising an access opening; and
- d) an access cover fitted to the access opening in the main cover and comprising a downwardly extending portion in contact with the macerating unit.

2. The apparatus of claim 1, wherein the macerating unit is further comprised of a motor including a drive shaft and a rotary cutting blade joined to the drive shaft disposed beneath the access cover and access opening, and the macerating unit is removable from the tank through the access opening in the main cover.

3. The apparatus of claim 2, wherein the downwardly extending portion of the access cover is in supporting contact holding the macerating unit in an operating position when the access cover is fitted to the main cover.

4. The apparatus of claim 1, wherein the macerating unit is displaceable from an operating position to a maintenance position when the access cover is removed from the main cover.

5. The apparatus of claim 1, wherein the tank is further comprised of a bottom wall comprising an upwardly extending feature, and wherein the macerating unit is comprised of a lower housing engaged with the upwardly extending feature.

6. The apparatus of claim 1, further comprising an electrical control module comprising a housing containing at least one of a sensor, a circuit board, a status indicator, a transformer, or a central processing unit, the electrical control module removably joined to a control opening in the main cover.

7. The apparatus of claim 1, wherein the downwardly extending portion of the access cover is in supporting contact with the intake basket of the macerating unit.

8. The apparatus of claim 1, wherein the macerating unit is further comprised of a cutting blade removably joined to

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a rotatable base, the cutting blade removable from the rotatable base and from the tank through the access opening in the main cover.

9. A macerating apparatus comprising:

- a) a tank having an open top and comprising a side wall and a bottom wall defining a tank volume;
- b) a main cover removably joined to the open top of the tank and comprising an access opening; and
- c) a macerating unit contained within the tank volume beneath the open top and comprising an intake basket comprised of a side wall including an inner side wall surface defining a basket interior and an outer side wall surface defining a portion of the tank volume exterior to the basket and at least one unobstructed hole therethrough providing fluid communication between fluid contained within the basket interior and in contact with the inner side wall surface of the intake basket, and fluid contained in the portion of the tank volume exterior to the basket and in contact with the outer side wall surface of the intake basket, a motor including an upwardly extending drive shaft, and a rotary cutting blade contained in the intake basket and operatively connected to the rotary drive shaft above the motor, the rotary cutting blade removable from the tank through the access opening.

10. The apparatus of claim 9, further comprising an access cover fitted to the access opening in the main cover and enclosing the cutting blade within the tank.

11. The apparatus of claim 9, wherein the cutting blade is disposed in a rotatable base comprising a recess contiguous with an edge of the cutting blade.

12. The apparatus of claim 9, wherein the cutting blade is rotatable so as to define a plane of rotation and is comprised a cutting edge that is canted so as to define a cutting edge plane that is non-parallel to the plane of rotation.

13. The apparatus of claim 9, wherein the tank is further comprised of a bottom wall comprising an upwardly extending feature, and wherein the macerating unit is comprised of a lower housing engaged with the upwardly extending feature on a bottom surface of the tank.

14. The apparatus of claim 9, further comprising a control module removably joined to a control opening in the main cover.

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15. A macerating apparatus comprising:

- a) a tank having an open top, and comprising a side wall and a bottom wall defining a tank volume;
- b) a main cover removably joined to the open top of the tank and comprising an access opening and a controls opening;
- c) a macerating unit disposed within the tank volume and comprised of an intake basket comprising a side wall including an inner side wall surface defining a basket interior and an outer side wall surface defining a portion of the tank volume exterior to the basket, the side wall including at least one open hole therethrough providing fluid communication between fluid contained within the basket interior and in contact with the inner side wall surface of the intake basket, and fluid contained in the portion of the tank volume exterior to the basket and in contact with the outer side wall surface of the intake basket; and
- d) an electrical control module comprising:
 - a housing mounted on the controls opening of the main cover, extending into the tank volume, and removable from the controls opening; and
 - at least one fluid property sensor disposed in the housing and within the tank volume.

16. The apparatus of claim 15, wherein the housing of the control module is removably joined to the main cover.

17. The apparatus of claim 15, wherein the at least one fluid property sensor is removable from the control module housing.

18. The apparatus of claim 15, wherein the at least one fluid property sensor senses a physical fluid property selected from capacitance, conductivity, flow, or pressure.

19. The apparatus of claim 15, further comprising an access cover fitted to the access opening in the main cover and comprising a downwardly extending portion in contact with the macerating unit.

20. The apparatus of claim 15, further comprising a cutting blade removable through the access opening in the main cover.

21. The apparatus of claim 15, wherein the macerating unit is further comprised of a motor including a drive shaft and a rotary cutting blade joined to the drive shaft and disposed in the tank beneath the access opening.

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