Rural Water Districts: The Nightmare is Real

By Rebecca Barnes

Picture it. You're standing downtown, in the middle of Main Street, high noon on a Tuesday. Not a car in sight. To your left, what used to be a neat row of shops is now a series of boarded-up windows, locked doors and "For Lease" signs. To your right, the town's only barber sits alone on a bench in front of his empty shop, sipping RC from a bottle and watching the tumbleweeds pass.

Suddenly, a dark shape appears on the horizon. You squint at it, certain at first that it must be a mirage, then with a shimmer it takes form - a car. Shiny and black, it purrs importantly into the center of town and slips up to the curb to a stop near the place where you stand. A tall man in a dark suit emerges from the driver's seat, turns to you and smiles.

"You the mayor?" he says.

"Sure am," you say, extending your hand. He takes it in his and gives it a firm shake, still smiling, and says, "Man, have I got a deal for you!"

Turns out he represents Acme Worldwide Widget, and they've decided to relocate their international headquarters to this very municipality. Administrative offices and warehouse in town, and a great big factory just outside.

"'Bout four hundred jobs, give or take," he says. "Can we deal?" The expression of abject joy on your face suffices as an answer, apparently, for he continues before you can speak. "Y'all will have to build us a road out there, of course, probably a new traffic light too, and lay all the pipes for the water lines and such," You nod vigorously "But you'll get your money back," he continues. "We'll be buying our water from you, see, and?"

But you don't hear anything else he says. You feel dizzy, your vision goes dim. Water, the man said. Of course the City will provide water to the factory. But 'the Rural Water District' your ears are ringing - names are floating through your head, names of cities who have lived this nightmare: McAlester, Elk City, Union City, Coweta, Muldrow - You cry out in despair, then sit bolt upright in bed, blinking and confused, covered with a clammy sweat. A dream. Just a terrible dream. It could never happen in real life.

Could it?

Sure it could. It's happened before. The City of Holdenville made all the investments to provide for a new prison that would create 250 jobs for the area, but guess who's selling them water? Not Holdenville. That right is exclusively the rural water district's.

"We took on this debt in order to create these jobs, and the rural water district is taking the gravy," said

Holdenville Mayor Jack Barrett. "Why should we be out a $34 million investment, and let them take the top layer? They did nothing."

In McAlester, the rural water district tried to maintain the exclusive right to service the Pittsburg County Exposition Center, even though they didn't have the capacity to provide enough water to satisfy fire codes. And speaking of fire codes, the Union City Fire Department, built to service the growing area between Union City and Oklahoma City, doesn't have a flushing toilet anywhere in the station. You can't get a drink of water there, either. The Canadian County Rural Water District agreed to service the station, but the price they demanded was far too exorbitant to fit in the fire station's budget. Water purchased from Union City, of course, would be reasonably priced, but alas, the station is in rural water territory. So in order to have adequate water to fight fires, they're having to truck it in from a remote location. Absurd? Sure. Unusual? Not even close.

"Water Wars" between cities and rural water districts is one focus of OML's Water Workshops. The workshops discuss the problems that can occur when cities try to expand, and also what can be done to deal with these issues when they arise.

Attendees of the workshops also learn about supply, upcoming regulations, infrastructure, pollution and water scarcity issues, and how to plan for these eventualities in order to minimize adverse effects for local residents. New rules for drinking water, storm water and wastewater treatment are illuminated, and representatives from the Department of Environmental Quality are on hand to emphasize the importance of following regulations. A panel of municipal representatives and industry experts discuss new trends in water infrastructure design. Homeland security issues relating to water are examined, as is funding options for water projects.

Water issues affect everyone. As these issues become more and more complicated, the need for education and communication is vital. Don't miss this chance to arm yourself with the information necessary to let your town grow while protecting its most vital resources. Call OML at (405) 528-7515 for details on when the next workshop will be held.

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