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United Water's vanishing act

Now you see them, now you don't. "They" are United Water, our favorite (and only) water utility serving most of Rockland, except for the Village of Suffern which, to the relief of residents, maintains its own water system.

In October, 2014, top management from UWR met with Harriet Cornell, chair of the Rockland County Task Force on Water Resources Management. This meeting came after the Public Service Commission turned the tap on UWR's plan to make up for what was presented as Rockland's water resource shortfall by building an expensive desalination plant in Haverstraw that would have added a maximum 7.5 million gallons a day of Hudson River water to the system.

The company's top U.S. officer, United Water CEO Bertrand Camus, pledged to be an active member of the Task Force. Richard Henning, United Water's vice president of public affairs, said the company was willing to offer expertise and other assistance.

His exact quote: "We are part of the fabric of the community... the company takes a long-term view of water supply and water service, making it beneficial for it to participate."

While ratepayers would have borne the cost of desalination for the foreseeable future, and are subject to a PSC ruling on UWR's rate case to recover questionable initial costs of the project, the water utility apparently has changed its interpretation of "long-term view" by bailing out of the Task Force after only 10 months.

Why the abrupt about face? Did United Water abandon ship in what the French would say *dans un accès de dépit*? One possible reason, at least the official line (in English) from United Water, is what they allege to be the incompetence of Task Force consultant Amy Vickers.

However, Riverkeeper draws heavily on the Vickers report, stating that Vickers made a plausible case that there was never a valid basis for a proposed desalination plant on the Hudson River in Haverstraw, and that 2.5 to 3.4 million gallons a day (MGD) of lost water could be recoverable through reasonable infrastructure repair measures. A further 1.9 to 3.6 MGD could be saved through customer-oriented conservation measures in Rockland County.

Her conclusion: the county can save 7 MGD of drinking water through conservation efforts and management of system leaks. The PSC, in halting progress on the desal plant, also cited management issues at UWR. Let's see, 7 mgd of water at no cost, instead



of 7.5 mgd of desalinated water at extraordinary cost,

On what logical basis does United Water deem Vickers unreliable? She was able to collect data from United Water as well as other sources and compare these data to uncover discrepancies and contradictions. What she found and reported, was that UWR issued different sets of figures to different agencies to justify its case for the desal plant, and to minimize or maximize its water losses, water capacity and management shortcomings depending on which agency received the report. United Water, in short, issues confusing and contradictory data and then blames Vickers for being confused.

We're also confused because United Water valued Vickers' expertise sufficiently that they tried to hire her also. Did her keen analysis reveal flaws in UWR operations that they did not want the public or the PSC to see? UWR dumped their local chief because of accounting discrepancies. A little touchy in the accountability area perhaps?

Let's go back to the Vickers report. The analysis is said to show high system loss in

Rockland County's water supply and is critical of the private company's accounting of water resources. Vickers' presentation indicates that United Water can dramatically improve the way it provides drinking water to Rockland residents.

According to Vickers, United Water has supplied erroneous, incomplete and inconsistent data. Once correcting for these errors, Vickers found that United Water has significantly underestimated water leakage from their system. Attention United Water: When you sell water as your only product and expect the public to pay for it, you should know where it's going. Perhaps not every drop can be accounted for, but guaranteed Starbucks can trace every cup of coffee they sell anywhere in the world hour by hour. UWR loses millions of gallons and remains clueless. And they still insist that Vickers is confused?

United Water's hasty exit from the Task Force raises other questions beyond leaky pipes and numbers that don't hold water either. These are questions that public relations stunts like kayaking on Lake DeForest cannot cover up. Their collaboration with the Task Force has been ordered by the Public Service Commission. This is a fine technical and legal point - is collaboration mandated participation? Or has UWR fulfilled its obligations and is now entitled to stand on the sidelines.

Until that issue has been resolved, the Task Force, the Water Coalition and other stakeholders should hold the utility's feet to the fire (if the hydrants have sufficient pressure to douse it) by demanding that the PSC explicitly define what United Water's legal obligations are. After all, they play a unique dual role in Rockland's water situation - part of the problem and part of the solution simultaneously.

Adding fuel to this fire is the news today that the PSC has allowed United Water a surcharge to pay for their desalination debacle that will raise water rates in Rockland by 12.3 percent.

This rate increase, in which all residents of

the county and all businesses and municipalities will pay for United Water's folly makes the utility's presence and participation on the Task Force even more important.

They are trying to hide from their own numbers while polishing their public face. A line from another story in which the French play a prominent role seems appropriate to United Water's vanishing act, this from "The Scarlet Pimpernel."

"They seek him here, they seek him there? Those Frenchies seek him everywhere? Is he in heaven or is he in hell? That damned elusive Pimpernel." □

An ounce of prevention

LEGIONNAIRE'S disease, unknown until the first outbreak in Philadelphia in the 1960s, has emerged in New York City with 113 cases reported as of Tuesday and at least 12 deaths thus far.

It has been rare in Rockland until this summer, when three cases have been reported. None are related; there is no common cause.

There is no reason to panic over the disease which seems limited to a particular area of the South Bronx and appears to be spread by contaminated cooling towers used for commercial and industrial cooling - hotels, as was the site of the 1960s outbreak, factories, even nursing homes.

What we do need to be aware of is what potential hazard these commercial cooling towers pose in Rockland even though there are far fewer than are concentrated in the Bronx.

New York City has mandated quarterly inspections and testing of cooling towers in an effort to stem this outbreak and prevent future outbreaks. We are not aware of any similar mandates for testing in Rockland, although we do know that Chromalloy, in Orangeburg, where the first local case was reported, took immediate steps to protect its employees and the public.

But why wait for another outbreak? More cooling towers are likely to be built here, so why not the same mandatory inspection and testing as an ounce of prevention? □

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