

City water czars should practice what they preach

by Roger Koopman

The Montana Public Service Commission, on which I am privileged to serve, regulates not only gas and electric utilities, but private water and sewer systems as well. While the PSC does not regulate the rates of publicly-owned water utilities like Bozeman's, the same principles apply to these larger systems as to the smaller private operations.

Unlike electric and gas power, where supply, in theory, is unlimited – by either increasing generation or market purchases – water supply can become seasonally hard-pressed when water usage depletes supply faster than wells and reservoirs are recharged. A common tool for encouraging conservation is the judicious use of amplified price signals. Typically, this is achieved through “inclining block rates,” whereby certain increments of additional water usage are charged at higher rates. The City of Bozeman does this, and is now instituting an additional inflated rate.

Most regulators and economists agree that some form of higher cost for larger volumes of consumption of a scarce summer resource makes sense, by creating the price incentive to use less. At the PSC, we generally embrace this policy, while recognizing that a less desirable monthly flat rate (set at \$50 for the first three years) is still necessary with small, meter-less operations.

All that said, Bozeman's water czars are handling their planned water rate hikes all wrong. Are we surprised? Call it governmental insensitivity. Call it institutional arrogance. Call it whatever you want, but their latest campaign to convince us that we'll love the higher water rates falls far short of the mark. Why? Because city officials still fail to understand that citizens don't appreciate being talked down to, and don't respond particularly well to guilt trips and insults. Imagine that?

I'll use myself as an example. I live on a modest in-town lot, 50 feet by 75. On this lot I grow copious amounts of summer flowers, to the delight of neighbors and passers-by, and spend many hours in my vegetable garden, producing enough fresh veggies for many friends and neighbors. This, inevitably, takes water – making me Public Enemy Number One.

So says the love note from the city I received in my July water bill, comparing me with my “efficient neighbors.” It informs me that while other water consumers are “responsible”, I am not. In their finger-wagging words, I “irrigate excessively” – based not on how I use the water (they would have no idea), or my property size, but strictly because of my net summer usage to keep my tomatoes and squash from wilting.

Give me a break. What do I need to do? Drill a well in my backyard so I can have a decent vegetable garden and a greenish-looking lawn? Or should I bring my plantings over to the city-owned Langhor or Westlake Garden, where there is NO water charge and UNLIMITED USAGE on sixty-three, 600 square foot plots (plus another 25 free water plots on the west side of City Hall.) How's that for water conservation???

Apparently, conserving water only applies to us residents, not to the city itself. City plot renters pay \$40 to \$60 per year, and get all the water they want. Meanwhile, folks like me will be paying \$100 to \$150 per month just to water my private garden. (Did someone whisper the word hypocrisy?)

Sure. I am willing to pay some upward-adjusted amount at my house, but I am not willing to have city bureaucrats hurl insults at me in the process. Nor am I willing to tolerate the city's "do as I say, not as I do" attitude, or their disingenuous claim that "efficient" and "responsible" consumers will now have lower, more affordable rates that balance the higher rates assessed backyard veggie growers. FACT: The lowest three tiers will save between 68 and 93 cents per month, while the deplorable "excessives" like myself must shell out an additional 30 bucks.

Game-playing. Even the public meeting aimed at placating Bozeman's fleeced class was deceptively advertised, speaking of "proposed rate changes" when all previous missives referred to the hikes as an already done deal. "Water Rates Are Changing" says the headline of the bill insert. But show up anyway. And prepare to be unimpressed.

Maybe I'm all wet (pun intended), but I think we have a right to expect more from our city government.

Roger Koopman is serving his second four-year term on the Public Service Commission, representing district 3, which includes Gallatin and 13 other counties.

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