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# Straight From the Tap

By Sydney Glasoe Caraballo, *The Journal*

*This article originally appeared in the October 19, 2016 issue of The Journal newspaper of Crosby, ND. It has been reprinted with permission.*

Murky, cold bathwater waited if you didn't get first dibs on the once-a-week bath before siblings. The same went for washing dirty clothes, and the toilet was outdoors.

Art and Doreen Schilke, who live on a farmstead south of Crosby, remember when clean water was a rare commodity on family farms. While they've had running water for years, this is the first year they've used water from the tap to make coffee. The Schilkes, like many rural families in Divide County, are now served by the Western Area Water Supply Project (WAWSP), which will have the capacity to serve as many as 125,000 people by 2038.

WAWSP celebrates its fifth anniversary this year with approximately 1,200 miles of pipeline installed. The project is managed by the Western Area Water Supply Authority (WAWSA), which has another 650 miles of pipeline planned. "Every day we are getting more users connected and getting more water infrastructure built," says Jaret Wirtz, WAWSA's Executive Director.

WAWSP, which is a public-private partnership, delivers water to Columbus, Crosby, Fortuna, Noonan, Ray, Ross, Stanley, Tioga, Watford City, Wildrose and Williston. The partnership also serves rural residents throughout Burke, Divide, McKenzie, Mountrail and Williams Counties.



Art Schilke enjoys WAWSA water. Photo courtesy of The Journal.

The authority takes water from the Missouri River and treats it at the Williston Regional Water Treatment Plant. The Williston plant serves as the primary supplier; the R & T Water Treatment Plant near Ray offers a supplemental supply source. WAWSA has increased the Williston plant's capacity to 21 million gallons per day and has built and/or upgraded two water towers, 10 reservoirs and 10 pump stations. The authority plans to construct and upgrade an additional tower, as well as four more pump stations and one more reservoir.

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The Schilkes didn't hesitate when WAWSA provided the opportunity to link into the water supply. Rural users get modern convenience, quality and superior infrastructure, according to the Schilkes. "Down the road when we sell our place," says Doreen, "it's a good thing to have quality water available. It's a good selling point."

The couple agrees rural residents here are fortunate when considering the drought in California and water restrictions, as well as limited access to quality water in other parts of the world. Not so long ago, local access to a convenient and clean water supply was hard to come by, said Art. "When you look at the old homesteads," says Art. "Most were built next to a slough to cart the water."

Art recalls his parents installing eaves troughs on the house to capture rainwater that would be stored in a cistern. Art and his siblings were tasked with cleaning sludge out of the cistern, as well as plucking out the drowned mice. "We used the same water over and over," says Art of bath time and doing the laundry. "The water supply was a huge issue."

The Schilkes, who eventually moved back to the Crosby area and bought a farmstead, have a dependable well at their farm, but they always hauled drinking water from Crosby. The well water contained a lot of iron, and rust was a constant factor. When the Schilkes seeded the lawn, they were immediately aware of the rust issue. "We put the sprinkler on, and it turned the foundation red in a day," Art says.

Water pressure is another advantage of the rural water project. "I don't have to stand in the shower and wait for the pump to pressure up again," Art says. "Now we can have all three showers going in the house at once."

Doreen adds that the showers and bathrooms are much easier to clean without contending with rust stains. She admits that while Art now drinks water from the tap, she still prefers drinking bottled water. However, "The new water makes better coffee than what I can get in town," she says. The Schilkes agree the rural water project is one lasting benefit of the oil boom.

WAWSA utilized the oil boom and its water needs by selling the authority's unused water capacity to the oil industry, which uses it for fracking wells. Sales from industrial depots with direct connections to WAWSA transmission mains have helped to fund construction of the vast public drinking water system.

“Our job is to provide good, clean water to everyone that wants it. Until everyone has it who wants water, our job isn't done.”

-Jaret Wirtz, WAWSA Executive Director

The authority has also secured funding for the current biennium with 32 percent funding through state government grants and the remaining funding coming from loans from the Bank of North Dakota, the State Water Commission and other state sources.

WAWSP will cost an estimated \$469 million by its completion, and the North Dakota State Legislature has obligated \$309 million. The authority initially planned to request \$60 million from the state for the upcoming 2017-2019 biennium.

"We've had to cut back our request due to the shortfall," says Wirtz of declining oil and gas revenue for the state. WAWSA's current request is for \$29 million. The legislature's funding approval will determine how much of the projected 650 miles of additional pipeline will be installed. Two future projects providing water to nearly 50 potential users in Divide County may be impacted. Wirtz says if WAWSA had been granted the \$60 million request, those projects would be funded without any issue. Instead, WAWSA will have to wait and see what its funding level will be for the following biennium and prioritize construction accordingly.

"Higher density areas take priority," says Wirtz. "As well as areas that are ready to go and where there is an emergency with poor quality water. The board makes those decisions." For now, Wirtz says the authority is keeping busy with its commitment to proper land restoration where additional pipeline was installed this summer.

Art says he is grateful to all the area landowners and farmers who agreed to water pipelines being installed on their land. "The landowners along the line need to be complimented," says Art, who is also contending with land restoration on his farm acreage.

Despite such inconveniences, the Schilkes believe area residents will benefit from WAWSP for years to come. "We take it for granted," Doreen says. "Your mind can rest easy that the water is always going to be there. It's something you don't have to worry about."

Wirtz says WAWSA is committed to keeping its current and future customers happy. "Our job is to provide good, clean water to everyone that wants it," says Wirtz. "Until everyone has it who wants water, our job isn't done." ■

## Winter is No Match for WAWSA Operations

Although below freezing temperatures may have put a stop to pipeline construction for the year, the WAWSA staff is as busy as ever. North Dakota's frigid weather ushers in the potential for winter-specific issues such as frozen pipes. "If a break or leak develops in a pipeline, our operators need to be on top of it immediately, in order to limit the amount of time customers could be without water. We're responsible for delivering high-quality drinking water and we take that responsibility very seriously," says Todd Pokrzywinski, WAWSA Operations Manager.

WAWSA employs four operators, two each for the North and South systems. They use a Supervisory Control and Data Acquisition (SCADA) system to keep tabs on how the entire system is operating. "The water treatment plants, pipelines, and pump stations are truly the heart of the WAWS system," Pokrzywinski. "SCADA technology allows our operators and the staff at the Williston Regional and R&T Water Treatment Plants to monitor everything that is going on within the WAWS system, in real time." For instance, if SCADA detects a loss of pressure at a pump station or within a pipeline, an operator is immediately deployed to inspect the infrastructure in question. Once on the scene, the operator determines whether a subcontractor needs to be called in to make repairs.

The operators also inspect pump stations on a daily basis to ensure they are free of pressure or temperature problems. They also watch out for evidence of pests, such as mice. Mice can quickly damage the wires that power the pumps. Without pumps that work, water cannot travel from the water treatment plants, through the pipelines, and into homes and businesses. The operators also check out the industrial water depots to ensure that spilled water doesn't turn into dangerous ice buildup. When ice does occur, the staff checks the heated lanes to make sure they are operating properly. If a serious problem develops, blow torches or skid steers are employed to melt or remove the ice.

Even though pipelines are not going into the ground right now, there is one type of construction that continues during the winter. The installation of meter reading equipment can be completed regardless of the weather. "It's important for the WAWSA member entities to accurately monitor usage, in order to pay for water service to their communities," says Pokrzywinski.

Over the winter, WAWSA's two landowner consultants, who focus much of their time on reclamation during the rest of the year, stay busy with coordinating crop loss and easement payouts. "Land reclamation stops over the winter. In the spring, WAWSA will pick up where we left off this fall with seeding or reseeded, and take care of any settling that has occurred," says Jaret Wirtz, WAWSA Executive Director.

Meanwhile, the WAWSA easement specialists and O&M staff are making preparations for next year's construction season. The easement specialists are working now to contact landowners to acquire easements. They focus on coordinating easements over the winter so new projects can be shovel-ready immediately after the bidding process is complete. The O&M staff are focused on fixing or maintaining equipment at the WAWSA shop. The WAWSA mapping specialist remains busy regardless of the season due to the ongoing project design process and updates to the project maps.

"Obviously, keeping a public water system that spans five counties involves year round maintenance and monitoring. I'm grateful that we have such a great staff who understand the responsibility we've been entrusted with to deliver drinking water to 70,000 people in northwestern North Dakota," says Wirtz. ■



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## WAWSA Legislative Corner

WAWSA intends to request \$29 million from the North Dakota Legislature to ensure the project's progress continues during the 2017-2019 biennium. The Governor's Budget currently includes \$319 million for the State Water Commission budget, with \$20 million in grant funding slated for the Western Area Water Supply Project. The grant funding would require WAWSA to provide at least 25 percent in matching funds.

"Of course, we were hoping to see a little more in the Governor's budget for WAWSA. However, we're grateful this public drinking water project is recognized in the executive budget. We just want to continue to make progress by delivering water service to more rural customers who are waiting for it," says Jaret Wirtz, WAWSA Executive Director.

WAWSA planned to complete eight rural projects with its \$29 million request, including the Spring Creek service area in the McKenzie County Water Resource District. WAWSA also wants to begin construction on five R&T Water Supply Commerce Authority projects around Stanley and White Earth, as well as a project north of Williston in the Williams Rural Water District.

By the end of the 2015-2017 biennium, WAWSA will have used all of the \$80 million allocated to the project for the current legislative session. Thus far, the North Dakota Legislature has obligated \$309 million to the \$469 million project. ■