

Valley Voices: Flint water crisis offers warning for Apple Valley

The crisis of contaminated drinking water in Flint, Michigan has now saturated the entire country and we have another example of failed government and what can happen when politicians and bureaucrats are in charge of water infrastructure.

While Democrats blame the Republican governor, and Republicans blame bureaucrats at the Environmental Protection Agency, the real first steps of the crisis happened where they usually do, at the municipal level with the government-owned and operated water district. This should be a sober reminder that a water system run by politicians and government bureaucrats may not be in everyone's best interest, particularly here in Apple Valley.

Here in Apple Valley we have heard all kinds of claims from our Town government about municipalizing water systems and the need for "local control." However, the reality is many municipal water systems in our nation are on the verge of failing or failing altogether — because investment in infrastructure is deferred to avoid rate increases. Consequently, the health and safety of the constituents is placed at risk in order to gain re-election.

"Fix it when it breaks" is a poor capital improvement plan for the community, but great for the politicians.

The American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) says America's municipal water systems get a grade of "D" and will need more than \$3.6 trillion of investment to restore the existing and aging water systems in the United States. Unmaintained systems place water users at risk. The American Water Intelligence (AWI) analysis of EPA data on serious violators of the federal Safe Drinking Water Act (SDWA) shows that privately owned and operated water companies, as opposed to municipal-owned water utilities, have a much cleaner record when it comes to SDWA violations and fines.

The city of Flint's water problems started in 2013 when they tried to use a change of water purveyors to help solve their dire financial problems. The city complained it paid too much for water from their previous purveyor, the city of Detroit, and terminated their dependence on Detroit water. They turned to local water sources, including the Flint River, but failed to use lead filtering water mains — another cost-cutting measure. The result? A community at risk and injury to children.

Today Apple Valley's town government cheerleads for the eminent domain acquisition of our private, regulated water system, and brags about the preponderance of government-run water systems. Yet these same water systems get grades of "D" by the ASCE. They complain about the investment of money in infrastructure repairs by Ranchos, which impacts rates for water service. Yet the near failing grade of poorly run municipally owned water systems occurs because of failure to invest in and maintain infrastructure.

And herein lies the problem with Apple Valley's town government's rush to take over, via eminent domain, Ranchos. It is all based on a desire to save money at the expense of protecting and preserving the water system that delivers clean, safe and reliable drinking water for Apple Valley.

One of the inherent benefits of having a privately owned water system is an opportunity to earn a profit, which provides an incentive to keep the water system well maintained for the public. State regulators want prudent, well-managed investment in water systems to fix aging pipes and facilities and to prevent situations like the Flint water contamination disaster.

Do we want our reliance on clean, safe water and reliable service to be held hostage to the next re-election campaign leading to years of deferred spending as water systems crumble?

Ironically, Apple Valley has a local connection with Flint, Michigan. Apple Valley's current director of finance was once the finance director of Flint. Maybe he knows the path that led the local government toward dangerous cost cutting.

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— *Diana J. Carloni, Apple Valley*