

5-7-10 Protect Our Infrastructure, Protect Our Country

New Meaning to Health and Homeland

On a quiet Saturday afternoon, I took a moment from cleaning the cellar and garage to look at the time. Yes! If I loaded up the car right then, I could get to my local dump; I mean transfer station, on their one whole day of being open and not have to go on Sunday morning. When such little things are big things, you know your life is pretty good. Well, you may not realize it at the time but when something really big happens, you know the difference and look back with appreciation.

That was one thought when I received my HHAN message to my cell phone on the way back from the transfer station. HHAN stands for Health and Homeland Alert Network. I can use it to send a message and various settings are in place for receiving them. I had not heard one on my cell phone in a long time. This one did get my attention, as the faltering female computer voice told me that the message alert was at the “severe” level and some communities were under a boil order for their water until further notice, as contaminated water was currently circulating.

Speaking of circulating, all kinds of thoughts went through my mind. What happened? Had someone contaminated the water? ...But here was no rushing the very slowly delivered phone message. I could only listen. Then the message emphasized that health care facilities using the MWRA must boil the water. I was still listening. Shock set in as I heard thirty two communities listed alphabetically from Arlington to Winthrop.

Once home, I was able to go online (Thank you, very much!) and learn more about the event. First, I read the HHAN message. I spotted a typo. I can't help it. It is my curse/gift. I find it fascinating that so often, these “mistakes” have meaning. The message said that these selected communities “are under a boil under until further notice.” Oh, yes, I bet they are under a boil! It will hurt and it will fester. And some blood will boil, too.

The necessity of water and the importance of protecting it and delivering it in a safe manner and in sufficient quantity were, of course, understood long ago. It was known that the old surface delivery via the Hultman Aqueduct, built circa 1940, was an aging system in need of an overhaul. With great foresight, \$728 million (set in 1995), the removal of 1, 025,000 cubic yards of rock, the application of 184,722 cubic yards of concrete to line the 17.6 miles of tunnel, 105.5 million gallons of water to fill them and 42,000 gallons of sodium hypochlorite (chlorine) to disinfect it, the Metro West Water Supply Tunnel was tuned on in November 2003. Finally, the Hultman Aqueduct could be repaired, allowing both water systems to serve and protect the communities completely dependent on them.

That brings us to the weak link, or leak, in the chain, so to speak, as the leak occurred at a connection between the new system and older distribution pipes. Are there more weak areas to be discovered? I hope they will be inspected. President Obama, isn't it time to look to FDR's Works Progress Administration program for inspiration when trying to reduce our unemployment and protect our country?

As I checked in with reports, I was impressed with the response of all the parties involved. MWRA updated their website frequently. The water was diverted; other water supplies and delivery systems put into use and people had water for showers and washing machines (dryers kill the E. coli); something many parts of the world do not have at all. To be safe, rather than sorry or sick, people were advised to boil their water before consuming it.

Emily Rooney, of my much-loved NPR, made light of the "water mess" and "water crisis" by repeatedly telling us that she never stopped drinking the water, as is. She was surprised, I think, as she offered her water drinking experience as a test case for science, that the effects of E. coli might not show up for a week. "Oh, oh", she said. Most of the water might be okay, but do you want to take that chance? How about your mother? How about your child?

Ian Bowles, secretary of Energy and Environmental Affairs, reminded Emily that some delivery systems had not been used in many years and, so, could not be depended on as clean and safe. Thank you, Wendy Kaminer, lawyer and social critic, for reminding Emily that some people are at great risk for serious illness from water contaminants and that the State acted appropriately in advising people to boil the water. She is an articulate and calming force.

All the emergency response teams did an outstanding job. I only know of one area needing improvement. I wish, for once, that HHAN could send out their message to us before, or at least at the same time as, the media. I have never received a HHAN message before television and radio and newspaper were talking about the same issue.

With new appreciation for my own private well, the importance of protecting all our water supplies, both surface and underground and for our emergency preparedness and response plans, I continue to clean out my cellar with gratitude that I can quench my thirst and take a shower afterward.

Cathleen Drinan is the health agent for the Town of Halifax, MA. What did you experience with the water crisis of 5-1-10 in Boston, MA? Contact her at 781 293 6768 or cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us