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Town water policy

We're not H2O thugs

Town says water policy is a simple matter of fiscal common sense

By ROGER BIANCHINI
Warren County Report

Stung by criticism by county officials and media reports about the political dynamics of its new water policy, Front Royal's mayor and town manager want their side of the story heard.

That side is that rather than trying to dictate county growth policies, the Town of Front Royal is simply trying to make decisions on the extension of water and sewer into the county that make economic sense for the town government and its citizens – citizens they point out who are also citizens of Warren County.

And that dynamic of town-county relations is one aspect of potential boundary adjustments

tied to town water and sewer extension that is often overlooked in the current discussion, Mayor James Eastham says.

"As far as people's concerns about the water policy being a [town] land grab in the county, it's still county land – they still pay county taxes, so the county really doesn't lose anything," Eastham observed. "It's a very different relationship than a city and a county, where if there is annexation by the city the land is no longer in the county."

The mayor says the option to boundary adjust is based on financial necessity.

"Sometimes people forget that the town is basically a utility that has different enterprises. We provide electricity, we provide water, we provide sewer, we have garbage pickup, we provide po-

lice protection, we provide snow removal, road repair – that's what we're about," Eastham says of the town's raison d'être (reason to be).

"And so when somebody wants to use our enterprises, if they live in town their taxes help underwrite those enterprises . . . So, if you're going to be benefiting from the use of water and sewer, common sense will tell you, you should be contributing to the support of that utility because it's a long-term proposition – that house is going to be there from here on out. So, it's not a land grab, it's just the town saying if you want to gain the benefits of the use of our utilities, then you should be like everyone else and help underwrite the infrastructure.

"Just the use of the utility



Front Royal Mayor James Eastham and Town Manager J. Michael Graham say the town is trying to be smart, not belligerent to the county with its water policy and growth stance.

doesn't necessarily pay for itself," Eastham says, noting that all the town's enterprises aren't profitable. "A prime example is recycling, we are underwriting that. As in all business administration, you have income producers and then you have others where you have to cover expenses and you have to look for revenue sources to underwrite those

"And we've been very fortu-

nate that we've been able to hold our taxes down. But with the new water plant coming on line (cost of \$6-\$7 million); with the new wastewater treatment plant that's basically been mandated to us and is going to cost three or four times more than the water plant (estimates \$30 to \$40 million), we've got debt that we have to satisfy," the mayor says of the town's current fiscal horizons.

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Town water policy

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“So, the town should have the option to boundary adjust land [it extends services to],” Eastham says of the town position.

Town Manager Michael Graham also believes there is a gap between the perception and reality of the town’s water policy passed last year in response to a query from the county on the town’s future intent regarding the extension of water and sewer into the county.

“The first perception is that if we boundary adjust, that we wouldn’t necessarily give water even though we boundary adjusted. The reality is no, if you’re boundary adjusted you’d be just like any other person in the town and you would be entitled to the benefits of living in the town. So, that would never happen – that we would boundary adjust and not offer water.”

The second misperception, Graham says, is that the policy was created to restrict growth. And while Councilman Stan Brooks has publicly called water one of the few tools the town has at its disposal to control growth, Graham said, “The council didn’t come up with the policy because we were trying to restrict growth or to exert a power control on the water. We were asked ‘what’s your water policy?’ and we provided one.”

“It’s not an anti-growth tool, it is a managed growth tool,” Mayor Eastham added.

“What it all comes down to is we’re going to get pressures to grow a lot faster than the county’s recommended three percent annual growth cap for the entire county,” Graham says. “A Centex would absolutely blow that whole projection right out of the water. So, that’s why you have to look at these things very carefully and that’s why both [the town and county] need to sit down and talk about it.”

Graham says the town’s water policy does not mandate boundary adjustment and leaves room for all involved to maneuver.

“It set up a process and we have a lot of steps in there that would allow alternatives within the process . . . and it works very simply: number one, all we are asking is if a developer and the county wants water, that they follow process number one, which is you ask for a boundary adjustment. Now the county or the developer has every right, that if they don’t like something or they feel there are too many proffers being asked and that it doesn’t make sense financially, to pull out at any time and withdraw their proposal.

“Step two, let’s say the county or the town decides it is not to their advantage to boundary adjust, it’s not contiguous or it doesn’t make sense for services and all that is involved, and we say, no we’re not going to boundary adjust. Then the next decision is do we want to give them water? And then you have a list of criteria there that answers the questions, does it make sense, do we have lines there, how much is it going to cost, what is the developer going to do to set it up?

“And a great example of that is Blue Ridge Shadows,” Graham says of water extension without boundary adjustment. “That is a great working model that is already successful, not border adjusted and we’re giving town water and sewer to a housing development in addition to commercial. So, we already have a great working model that shows success and cooperation between the town and the county.”

Mayor Eastham says the town government agrees with planning models such as the one 18th District Delegate Clay Athey was involved in proposing in the recent state legislative session.

“Urban zones around the town, where you want to direct the growth, that’s good planning and that makes sense because you don’t want to keep sticking

straws (wells and septic) into the ground – it’s better to have centralized water and keep your growth in your urban areas,” Eastham says. “The challenge, the dilemma that the county has is they can encourage growth to be on the town’s borders or in the town for that matter. But then you have the farmer who dies in the county and the kids, A/ don’t want to farm the farm; or B/ can’t afford to pay the taxes and so they have to sell the farm to pay the taxes. And who out there can afford to buy the farm? More often than not, it’s developers.

“And [if] the developer does a by-right subdivision in the county, there are no proffers to mitigate impacts on the school system, social services, fire and rescue, recreation – all those services the county provides to help people to live inside the town who are county residents and people who live outside the town in the county. And it depends on where the farmer who dies property is that determines where the subdivision goes. So, there’s no rhyme or reason to it,” Eastham says of the role of fate in county growth patterns.

The mayor says he agrees with county officials who promote clustering as a means of preserving open space around development and says, “What we have challenged the planning commission to do is to look at the whole puzzle and see how all these pieces fit in, so that when it’s all said and done you’ve got a rhyme and reason to your roads, you have interconnectivity.”

Both Eastham and Graham say it is the town’s intent to work with the county, not against it in seeking a viable future growth pattern that makes sense on both sides of the town-county line.

“Talking about the water policy, as a town we have a major obligation . . . to provide water, sewer to our open land [when it is developed]. Then comes the

question to council, do we want to extend water outside the community?” Graham says. “They want to know [from staff] if we can accept a community with 300 houses outside the town limits, and also if someone in the town limits, like Millennium, comes in and wants to build 300 houses.

“So, it’s not that we’re playing like God with the water or we’re restricting growth in the county – it’s that our first obligation is to make sure we can serve the people within our own community,” Graham says.

The town manager also acknowledges that upgrades to the town’s water plant and then the wastewater treatment plant, the latter scheduled for completion in 2010, will give the town the increased capacities to more

easily handle requests on both sides of the town line.

“But then moving out into the future as we increase our capacities, we’ve got to determine is it fair to have the citizens of the town bear that financial burden of somebody out in the county getting the water – not that we wouldn’t want to give it to them. And I think Jim made a great point, I don’t think we’ve ever denied the county having what they want, look at the 522 corridor.”

But that was then, this is now.

The question remains will the town and county governments be able to move beyond personalities, beyond dueling visions and find the common ground on managed growth that both say they are seeking?

High Knob Utilities named Virginia Water System of the Year

From a release:

High Knob Utilities, Inc. was named the 2007 Virginia Water System of the Year by the Virginia Rural Water Association at the association’s annual conference in Roanoke on Wednesday, March 28. The award was based on the utility’s outstanding performance in executing both a financial and operational turnaround from 2000 to 2006, and recognizes the system as outstanding water system in the state of Virginia.

Accepting the award, HKUI President David Henderson stated, “We feel that the transformation of this water system from its indebted, crisis condition in 2000 to the system in place today is a truly significant accomplishment, especially in view of the fact that the effort was initiated, financed, and managed by a volunteer community organization.”

The statewide competition is open to the 210 water systems

that are voting members of the VRWA. High Knob Utilities falls in Region 3, which also includes Strasburg, Woodstock, Luray, Mt. Jackson, New Market, Leesburg, and Warrenton.

Prior to 2000, the High Knob water system was in such bad shape that water had to be trucked in by contractors, and some homes were without water for up to three days. Over half of the water being distributed was lost to underground leaks. At one point, the Virginia Department of Health (VDH) placed a moratorium on new housing construction until the water system could meet the community’s needs. In addition, the utility was \$52,000 in debt.

In late 2000, a new rate structure was established and the outstanding debt was paid off. An engineering study was commissioned to recommend improvements to the system, and a five-year, \$1.25 million water system improvement project resulted.