

Pollution problems

Water resources protection urged

By Tom Ahern
News-Times public affairs editor

DANBURY — People apparently feel a thirsty society may find itself echoing the now-famous words of Samuel T. Coleridge's ancient mariner unless resources receive greater protection.

"Water, water all about and not a drop to drink," said the mariner in Coleridge's poem.

In the same vein, speakers at a hearing last night urged local and state officials to protect aquifers, or underground layers of rock permeated with water, limit phosphate invasion into lakes, prevent new road construction and road runoff, establish new septic system requirements, rid rivers and streams of dangerous chemicals and educate the public about resource use.

Comments were solicited as part of Project Listen, a planning phase of a federally funded clean water program. The state Audubon Society has the contract to gather citizen suggestions for a plan being developed locally.

When written, the regional plan will become part of an overall state program aimed at eliminating pollution from non-point sources — a term used to indicate generalized polluters rather than impure substances coming from a point source such as an industry's waste pipe.

Many of the 50 persons at the hearing represented local wetlands agencies, lake authorities or private environmental groups. Most of the session was devoted to their comments.

One homeowner, Dora Taylor of Danbury, complained that shoddy construction practices and lax management of Padanaram Brook contribute to siltation of the stream.

Now, when heavy rains cause

flooding, her house is awash, she said, adding she keeps a pair of saw horses near her door to hoist her furniture onto when the water rises.

John Fleming, a member of Woodbury's planning commission, noted that "people cause pollution." In his community, this is combated with zoning regulations that among other things, protect a large aquifer that lies under the town's main business district.

When a number of people expressed

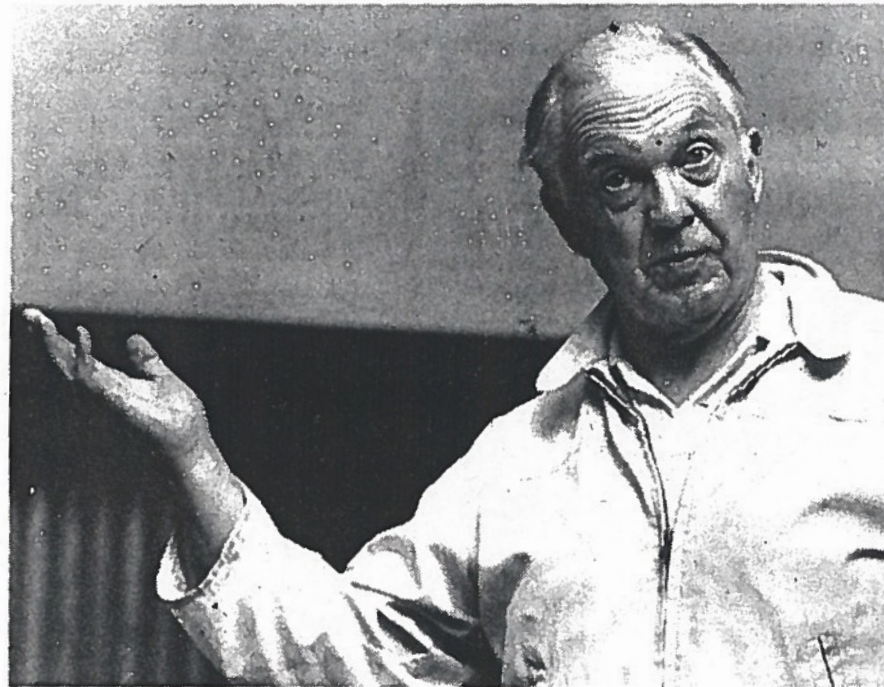
unhappiness about poor water quality in area lakes, Mark Possidento, the state's coordinator for the pollution program, noted that residents in the Lake Coventry area of Willimantic asked the Department of Environmental Protection to impose a phosphate ban in their area.

Phosphates contribute to algae and weed growth in lakes. The plants rob the water of oxygen needed for other wildlife, including fish.

DEP commissioner Stanley Pac hasn't acted yet on the Coventry request, however.

Possidento noted the water pollution program's goal is rivers, lakes and streams that can be used for fishing and swimming by 1983.

The program needs direction from local agencies and individuals who must also enforce whatever regulations enacted locally to achieve goals they established.



News-Times photos by Carol Kaliff



Public awareness

Mark Possidento, right, the state coordinator for a \$1.5 million water pollution program, listens to John Fleming of Woodbury, above, a supporter of greater public awareness of water pollution problems.

Local water system failures shatter dreams

By Michele Derus
News-Times staff

The American dream gone dry is an old story, but it is one that hundreds of Danbury area homeowners recite bitterly to anyone who will listen.

It begins with a home on a small lot which promises the buyer comfort and happiness — an outdoor deck, a nice view, a brick fireplace are the usual lures. The real draw, however, is usually the price.

The price is comparatively low,

prospective buyers find. A savings is possible because the development isn't served by a municipal water system and doesn't have its own well. Water is supplied by a community well from which everyone draws.

That seems such a reasonable economy especially to young couples who face lean years early in the mortgage payoff period.

Sometimes the bargain turns out a good one, but often it turns out a trap. Community water systems are usually developed by the same contractors

building the houses. Their main interest is home sales, not water utility operation.

Often, the well system is undersized for the number of homes it serves. When capacity is substantial, oftentimes elevations create pressure problems. Occasionally, pipes are poorly installed, the wrong size or improperly insulated.

Getting these deficiencies corrected is often an extended, frustrating battle and makes the story.

Corrections entail investments which

small utility owners are often incapable or unwilling to make. If the company serves more than 50 customers, it is regulated by the state Public Utilities Control Authority (PUCA). No company can raise rates without authority approval, so the agency often makes rate increases contingent on specific system improvements.

Until this year, companies serving less than 50 customers were insulated from government rules. Connecticut's General Assembly changed this status by granting PUCA authority over small

community water systems whose customers petition for state supervision.

No homeowners groups in Connecticut have requested such state regulation so far, according to PUCA Commissioner Gerald McCann.

Obtaining state supervision is no guarantee of adequate water service, as about a dozen recent examples in the Danbury area have demonstrated.

Shortages in community water systems have been reported throughout Danbury, Newtown, New Fairfield, Brookfield, New Milford, Woodbury and Ridgefield this summer. The complaint list grows longer and tempers grow shorter, as homeowners struggle for adequate clean water.

PUCA is scrambling to keep up with the problems. Tonight the agency opens hearings on the Van Roy Water Co., which serves Ball Pond in New Fairfield, Pleasant Acres in Danbury and Lone Oak in New Milford. The subject is owner LeRoy Burke's failure to make system improvements and billing record changes ordered in conjunction with a 50 percent rate increase last fall.

The hearing is scheduled for 7 p.m. in Room 114 of Western Connecticut State College's Higgins Hall.

Several other companies have incurred customer and regulator displeasure, a check of PUCA complaint record shows.

A litany of gripes about Rural Water Co., which serves West Redding, Brookfield, Danbury and Ridgefield, and Dan Con Corp. of Danbury have been registered with state regulators.

A recent hearing concerning Rural Water Co. turned up evidence that company officials had used a system improvement loan for private purposes. A PUCA spokesman said state auditors plan to review company books to find out exactly how the money was spent. Inquiries have been made into the Dan Con operation supply.

State files show complaints also have been filed this year against Millbrook Water Co. of Brookfield, Forest Hills Estates in New Milford and Heritage Village Water Co. of Southbury.

These companies represent a small fraction of community water utilities in Connecticut, McCann said. "We hear nothing about most companies, which

must be doing fine, but we hear most complaints about a few," he said.

Problems result from inherent deficiencies in the system or maintenance problems not solved because the owner lacks funds, McCann said.

"The size of the (water) main may be too small, the lines may be old with reduced capacity, the pump may not be the right size or the system may have no storage capacity," he said. "If it's a matter of fixing or replacing a pump, fine. But if the lines are bad, there's little we can do. There's no sense ordering the impossible."

Maintenance problems often result from the utility's inattention to the system or from an unwillingness to take the time, expense and hassle of a rate case, McCann said.

"A good number of small companies don't come in when they should. They may wait six, eight, even 12 years without asking for a rate increase and that's incredible, considering the rampant inflation we've seen in recent years," he said.

Owners often are forced into filing for rate increases by ailing systems and angry customers. By then, the hike is substantial and the users are in no mood to accept it, McCann said.

"We hear people say 'I don't mind paying more, as long as I get better service,' or 'Don't give him the increase because service is lousy,'" McCann said. "Often, the owner needs the rate increase to get a bank loan for the system improvements, that's how financially strapped he is."

Since the state is limited to remedying existing problems, McCann said his agency may focus on preventive measures.

One idea is to get authorization for engineering review over all new water systems, whether big or small. McCann said his agency plans to push next year for legislation granting the authority "so we can anticipate and offset system problems."

A second proposal involves the review of water utility annual reports, so PUCA staffers can predict financial crunches or long-term investment needs, he said.

"The time to get at water company problems," McCann said, "is before they begin."

