

BAILIWICK NEWS

Reporting and critical analysis of State College public affairs

October 7, 2016

Editor's Note: Keith Nelson, a Penn State psychology professor and faculty senator, contacted me on July 6, 2015, which was the day the *Centre Daily Times* published an op-ed I had written connecting the dots between Penn State business and finance administrators, Penn State trustees, Ferguson Township supervisors, Centre Region Planning Commission, and ClearWater Conservancy, partially explaining the deafening silence of local water protection organizations surrounding the threats to the Harter-Thomas water wells posed by the Toll Brothers student housing project.

Dr. Nelson explained that he was interested in working with me on another local water-quality story, about independent lab-documented contamination in some State College Borough Water Authority wells, tanks and taps. Thus, during July and August 2015, Dr. Nelson and I researched and co-wrote the following piece, intending to seek publication in one or more of our local mainstream print and online newspapers. In late August, we submitted the report – with the data summary – to John Boogert, editor of the *Centre Daily Times*; to *StateCollege.com*; and to *The Daily Collegian*.

Boogert declined to publish our report, and declined to assign a reporter to cover the issues raised. *StateCollege.com* also declined to publish. *The Daily Collegian* published a shortened version of the story on Sept. 23, 2015. David Yoxtheimer, consulting hydrogeologist for the SCBWA, emailed me shortly after the *Collegian* story ran, objecting to the piece, and then published a response entitled “Local water safe to drink, no threatening contaminants” on Sept. 30, 2015.

More than year after Nelson and I submitted our piece to local newspapers, the *Centre Daily Times* has finally published a report on lab-detected water contamination in the SCBWA system, based on the same 2014 data we cited for our report. The *CDT* piece, by Lori Falce, ran on Sept. 28, 2016.

Local governments need to strengthen and enforce water protections

By Keith Nelson and Katherine Watt
August 28, 2015

As citizens and parents, we share with all members of our community the right to safe, pure water. For drinking water, that right is recognized at the national level. The Safe Drinking Water Act (SDWA) is the key federal law. Under SDWA, the US Environmental Protection Agency sets standards for drinking water quality and oversees – and sometimes sanctions – the states, localities, and water suppliers who implement those standards.

Streams and aquifers are protected in multiple, closely related ways, especially through regional plans, such as the Centre Region Comprehensive Plan, that aim to preserve adequate recharge lands zoned by local zoning boards as agriculture and/or open space. If these protections are not implemented and enforced, however, the quality of drinking water will likely be compromised.

EPA guidelines, well-thought-out regional plans and more local master plans will not achieve their aims if they are treated as “merely advisory.” The actual patterns of decisions, and transparency to the public about those decisions, must align with noble plans and guidelines, or else citizens will see that agricultural lands, forest lands, open space, and water quality all disappear at shocking rates.

As required by law, our local State College Borough Water Authority makes available to the public any water testing results upon request. Ideally, those results would be available on the website, to enable free and efficient digital searches. We found instead that a citizen must pay SCBWA for producing paper copies. So we requested “all test results” for 2009 and 2014, and paid for the copies received.

Despite not receiving all such results, the test results we did receive – conducted by Eurofins/Eaton Analytical and Fairway Laboratories – raise some serious concerns, including several test results that showed contaminant levels that SCBWA must report to an EPA database whenever local contamination matches or exceeds the EPA Minimal Reporting Level (MRL).

Lab tests found excess vanadium – associated with altered kidney tissues and kidney function – in 12 different test site samples in 2014. The highest detected level was 0.62 parts per billion, more than three times the 0.20 ppb MRL adopted by the EPA.

Lab tests found excess 1,4-dioxane – a probable human carcinogen in all its forms – in one 2014 test of the Alexander Wellfield.

Lab tests found excess levels of Chromium-6 or Hexavalent Chromium – associated with increased risk of stomach and other cancers and brought to public awareness by the movie *Erin Brokovich* – in all the 2014 test results we obtained. Twenty samples of water from SCBWA tanks, wellfields and taps (ten in March and ten in September) all fell above 0.20 ppb and far exceeded the EPA MRL level of 0.03 ppb. Four sites showed contamination at levels of 0.57 to 0.60. Even more worrisome, all SCBWA Chromium-6 results exceeded peak levels reported in Hinkley, California in the *Erin Brokovich* case (0.20 ppb) and all those reported by the Environmental Working Group in a 2010 study of drinking

water in 31 cities. In that study, Los Angeles had the highest tested levels, at 0.20 ppb.

At present, neither federal nor state laws require water authorities to address the Chromium-6 problems, but common sense certainly does. We invite all members of local government agencies and boards and all interested citizens to preserve critical open spaces, avoid further contamination of streams and aquifers, and treat/remediate the Chromium-6 and other contamination detected in our drinking water.

In addition, more transparency with the public is in order. To our knowledge, none of our public servants have publicized results we have shared here. The results definitely contradict statements on the SCBWA website in their annual Treated Water Quality reports for 2013 and 2014: "Not listed are the more than 80 other contaminants we tested for and found nothing."

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Bailiwick News sees two main issues in play here. One is the failure of local media leaders to support solid, timely, contextualized reporting on complex, controversial public issues. The other is the important fact that the 2014 lab tests did not, to our knowledge, find reportable

contamination in the water at the Harter and Thomas wellfields. Since those two wellfields provide between one-half and two-thirds of the total daily supply, their relatively high quality helps dilute the contaminants entering the system through some of the other wellfields. This is a key reason why it's important to stop land development activity in the Slab Cabin Run watershed that feeds the Harter-Thomas wells. We do not have other wellfields of equal or greater volume and purity to replace the Harter-Thomas supplies if they are compromised.

IN PROGRESS – Report on Centre Region Act 537 sewage treatment planning.

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MARCH 2014 DATA SUMMARY – SCBWA LAB TESTS

POLLUTANT Units: micrograms per liter*	Chromium	Hexavalent Chromium	Strontium	Vanadium	1,4 Dioxane
MAXIMUM RECOMMENDED LEVEL (MRL)	0.20	0.03	0.3	0.20	0.070
TANK 1	0.29	0.28	130	-	-
TANK 6	0.30	0.28	35	0.20	-
TANK 7	0.30	0.28	94	0.25	-
ALEXANDER Wellfield	0.25	0.28	32	0.20	0.077
CHESTNUT RIDGE Wellfield	0.42	0.44	61	0.22	-
GRAYS WOODS Wellfield	0.95	0.26	88	0.62	-
NIXON Wellfield	0.56	0.60	34	0.21	-
PARK FOREST VILLAS	0.27	0.29	32	-	-
PINE GROVE LIONS CLUB	-	0.39	-	-	-
FILTER PLANT	0.26	0.27	120	-	-

SEPTEMBER 2014 DATA SUMMARY – SCBWA LAB TESTS

POLLUTANT Units: micrograms per liter*	Chromium	Hexavalent Chromium	Strontium	Vanadium	Molybdenum
MAXIMUM RECOMMENDED LEVEL (MRL)	0.20	0.03	0.3	0.20	1.0
TANK 1	0.57	0.33	170	0.20	-
TANK 6	0.32	0.28	63	0.24	-
TANK 7	0.31	0.28	96	0.27	-
ALEXANDER Wellfield	0.51	0.28	39	0.20	-
CHESTNUT RIDGE Wellfield	0.86	0.58	51	0.22	-
GRAYS WOODS Wellfield	0.48	0.27	95	0.28	-
NIXON Wellfield	0.78	0.57	55	0.25	-
PARK FOREST VILLAS	0.62	0.59	50	0.23	-
PINE GROVE LIONS CLUB	0.64	0.57	64	0.24	1.2
FILTER PLANT	0.51	0.32	170	0.20	-

*1 microgram/liter = 1 part per billion (ppb)