

"Federation Corner" column
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WSSC hits bottom using scare tactics of exploding pipes

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Two months ago, I wrote about WSSC and its relationship to the Loch Ness Monster through the use of what had been labeled the Nessie curve for water pipe replacement because it looked like the back of that creature. It turns out that something is actually monstrous: WSSC's desperate effort to scare county officials and customers into handing over hundreds of millions of dollars by concocting absurd scenarios of exploding pipes that could cause "injuries, property damage and even death". It turns out that at a MNCPPC forum last fall, former WSSC General Manager Andrew Brunhart warned the resulting explosion would be like 'a missile.' Such an explosion could have the force of 20 to 200 tons of dynamite", WSSC engineers say. If mains blow near development, "they are likely to take some houses with them," Brunhart said at the forum.

Since such ludicrous claims were, surprisingly, not used as part of the disinformation campaign in the run-up to WSSC's hearings in February, I didn't write about it then because I had heard nothing about it, nor did I find one word of such alleged dangers on the WSSC website or in the detailed WSSC documents that I read. The fact that such an event has NEVER happened anywhere in the U.S. did not stop WSSC officials from making such a statement last fall nor to repeat it when questioned by a reporter several weeks ago. Having made up such a tall tale, here's how WSSC has elaborated on it:

"A recent analysis by the utility made available earlier this year indicates that 200 buildings in the two counties are at heightened risk because they are in or next to WSSC's rights of way for large water mains. At least 690 buildings are closer than the recommended 80-foot setback, the utility's officials said Tuesday. As undeveloped land becomes scarcer in the two counties, pressure is building to place homes and businesses closer to water mains, they said. Even the recommended standard would not put people and property out of harm's way if a large pipe burst. "We're trying to balance risk associated with these pipes and the desire of development to use the property that they own," Gumm said. 'It's not practical to require that much land not be developed,' said Ross A. Beschner, manager of the WSSC's water main risk assessment. But putting more people and property in range of a potential high-pressure pipe break increases risk, as well as the need for monitoring, repairs and money to pay for both, according to the WSSC's studies."

As it turns out, WSSC is only talking about 143 miles of these large, high-pressure mains. The permit and inspection fees for both new residential and nonresidential service can be increased to help pay for the monitoring and replacement of these large mains to eliminate the alleged dangers created by the buildings being placed in proximity to these mains. Financially mitigating whatever risk which might actually exist should be assumed by those putting themselves in proximity to it through new construction, rather than asking the rest of the customers to assume such a responsibility.

In reality, the only danger bursting mains would pose would be severe erosion around and flooding of such buildings. Obviously, no one wants such damage to their home or business, but the occurrence of such events is no basis to demand huge amounts of money in advance to rush forward to do something. I have previously documented that such pipe replacement is only a moderate priority to WSSC and that the high priority is to actually figure out where their problems are and how to fix them in both a timely and effective manner. There is time to plan to do a systematic replacement over a long period of time and WSSC should use this time to figure out how to do it right.

However, the longer that WSSC wastes this time concocting scare tactics that no one believes, the further behind it will get in creating a legitimate timetable. From time to time, pipes do cause houses to blow up.

However, these are pipes carrying natural gas, which we all know is very flammable. Most houses in the bi-county area have these pipes going into their houses, but nobody lives in fear of them blowing up, even though they sometimes do. That WSSC would imply that its "exploding" water pipes might be worse than an exploding gas pipe further undermines the believability of their fantasy.

WSSC's reputation for corruption and political scheming over the years does not help it be believed about anything. The fact that it does not want the county Inspector General (IG) looking at its operations further undermines its credibility. Recently, it hid behind the fig leaf that it is a state agency, claiming it does not have to let the county-level IG look at its books. As a compromise, WSSC will supposedly hand over the requested information to the County Executive who will then give it to the IG, but there is no reason to do it that way unless WSSC does not want the IG anywhere near them, an attitude that indicates that they have something to hide. As it turns out, when a councilmember asked the IG to investigate WSSC about "various allegations of patronage and corruption" in March 2004, WSSC officials then refused to cooperate and the WSSC General Counsel instead said that he had asked the "attorney general's office to look into the allegations." With such behavior as that, who could possibly believe WSSC when it says that large pipes could explode with the force of tons of dynamite?

Frankly, WSSC needs to clean up its ethics and how it communicates with others even as it tries to come up with a legitimate plan for water pipe replacement. It has tried to do both in fits and starts in recent years, but it really needs to commit to it in a much larger way. It should invite the IG to help it do this, because its internal efforts at reform appear to have gone as far as it can go, as WSSC now feels compelled to tell scary bedtime stories to try to get what it wants.