

OP-ED COLUMN SUBMISSION: The Morning Call

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Managing our most precious resource & the most refreshing beverage in the Valley

The American Water Works Association says it best. This organization, which provides much leadership and support for water utility professionals across the nation, is currently reaching out to communities to help citizens understand the value of their public water utility service. Their awareness campaign includes t-shirts, bumper stickers and similar items with the phrase “No water, no beer.”

This sentiment was in the hearts and minds of a Lehigh County Commissioners in 1969 when Kraft Foods and the Schaefer Brewing Company were considering opening new manufacturing facilities in the Lehigh Valley. The County Commissioners understood that this economic advancement could not be possible without a sustainable public water supply and sewer service. They charged Lehigh County Authority (LCA) with the responsibility of developing expertise in water resource management, and supporting the economic development that could be brought to the region if public water services were available.

And the rest, as they say, is history. Over the past five decades, the brewery in Fogelsville has changed hands numerous times with big name products being produced here including Schaefer, Stroh and Pabst beer, Smirnoff Ice and, most recently, Sam Adams beer. Coca Cola, Nestle Waters and Kraft have been long-term residents of this food and beverage manufacturing hub, more recently joined by Niagara Water, Ocean Spray and Bimbo Bakery.

I may be biased, in fact I’m sure that I am, but I’d say the first key ingredient to this very specific kind of growth in food and beverage manufacturing is the availability of plentiful, high-quality, affordable water. The second key ingredient is the availability of industrial wastewater treatment services that can address the unique strength of the waste that is produced in great quantities by such manufacturers.

The County Commissioners had the foresight to form LCA to be a dedicated resource to the community in managing these services. This is no small task, and the work we do every day has proven to be challenging, evolutionary and exceptionally rewarding.

One critical component of the services LCA provides to support the region's beverage industry is the water supply, our most precious resource. The Lehigh Valley has been blessed with an abundant source of high-quality water found in our limestone aquifers, large springs and the Little Lehigh Creek. Water here is replenished by approximately 45 inches of rain each year.

Water that is in abundance, but also in great demand, must be managed properly. LCA's focus over the years has been to develop water sources for the public's use that have the least impact on overall water availability. We measure this through groundwater well depths and other measures that show the water that is being withdrawn does not negatively impact our environment. We can see groundwater recharge happening on a cyclical basis throughout the year as the spring and fall rains replenish the water table back to historical levels.

Diversifying our water sources also has a positive impact on regional water supply management. In 2009, LCA signed an agreement to supplement our well water supply by purchasing water from the City of Allentown, whose water is generated primarily through springs and the Little Lehigh Creek. In 2013, when LCA assumed operating responsibility for the city's water and sewer systems, this enhanced our ability to manage water supplies within our service area.

To be clear, while beverage manufacturers make up a significant portion of LCA's revenue base and are an important part of our operation, a lot has changed in the 48 years since LCA was formed. Today, every customer is "number one" to LCA. Almost 200,000 citizens rely on LCA for safe, reliable and affordable water and sewer service every day, and that responsibility is paramount for our dedicated staff and board of directors.

As we invest in our infrastructure, develop sustainable water supplies, and evolve with the changing regulatory environment for water and wastewater treatment, LCA's mission is laser-focused on delivering exceptional value to our customers through our high-quality, affordable and reliable water and wastewater services.

When our customers are thirsty, there are many great beverage choices available, and many of those beverages are made right here in the Lehigh Valley. However, we hope that every customer will also take a moment to enjoy the most refreshing, most affordable, tastiest beverage of all – tap water!