

Amy Benedict

## CONSERVATION

I grew up in a small town in New York State with a hand-dug well. I grew up respectful and careful of water.

In 1999, Pine Trails Utility Company, owned by Mr. Patel, filed for a water/sewer rate increase. It was the first rate increase he had requested in approximately ten (10) years. The hearing was held in Jacinto City community center - convenient for Pine Trails folks to attend. The room was packed - I represented Pine Trails. The rates being requested were similar to those Aqua requests: higher base and lower gallonage rate. The homeowners were there and I was allowed to offer an alternative and asked the Judge for approval to have the homeowners respond. My suggestion was a small increase in the base rate water and sewer but the cost per gallon of water used increased dramatically after two and ten thousand gallons of water were used. All present agreed. So did Mr. Patel and TCEQ and the case was settled.

We were sold at the end of that year and AquaSource filed for a three-year increase. The base rate doubled and the cost of water was reduced. Folks in my neighborhood who had a \$28 water/sewer bill, using approximately 1000 gallons of water each month, saw their bills double overnight. Others, who used excessive amounts of water, actually saw their bills go down. We were no longer paying for the product - simply for the connection.

We are now paying \$89.01 base for water/sewer - and then we pay for water. In spite of the pass-thru charge and Ike recovery fees, most homes pay approximately \$110 to \$120 each month for water. My understanding is that the Ike recovery fee is for the pumps damaged during Hurricane Ike. I can understand that. The pass-thru fee - I can only assume - is something Pine Trails paid back in 1998 and 1999 when our area would be converting to surface water. Mr. Patel was a smart owner and began collecting from residents, and paying the subsidence district, for the pumps and piping that would be required when surface water became mandatory in, I believe, early 2000. We had paid for the majority of our expenses converting to surface water before the law took effect. I can only assume the pass-thru we are currently paying is to convert other services in the County to surface water. It is not right! We already paid for ours - but that is how Aqua works.

My biggest problem is that there is no conservation. I remember in 2002, leaving the hearing room when a tentative settlement had been worked out between AquaSource and TNRCC. They had agreed to a much higher base rate and much lower price per gallon of water. I know I told the attorney representing TNRCC that they needed to change their name and remove "Conservation". Was I surprised less than a year later than Aqua (shares traded to two Aquas but we were not Aqua Texas yet) filed for a four-year increase - raising the base rates ever higher. TNRCC had become TCEQ - Texas Commission on Environmental Quality. No conservation!

There is no reason to limit your use of water - it is the cheapest thing you pay for and the bill - before any usage - is approximately \$100.00. Another two thousand gallons of water will only cost you about \$6.00. Should I rush to fix that leaky faucet? Probably not. Should I fix that toilet that seems to run all the time? Probably can't afford to once I've paid my \$130.00 water bill.

We have homeowners come to board meetings asking what they can do to bring their water/sewer bills down. They limit the kids time in the showers, reuse towels - the list goes on. They are conserving every drop of water they can - and it makes no difference to the bottom line which is a horribly high water bill. So they quit conserving as it really doesn't change their bottom line. On the other side of the coin - they are wasting thousands and thousands of gallons of water because they really cannot afford (after paying their water bill) to fix small leaks as they pop up and wait until they become catastrophic.

I remember reading a definition for Public Utility years ago not long after AquaSource acquired us. It said something to the effect that the purpose of a public utility was to provide, at minimal cost, a service all the public could afford AND provide all that service that the public might require. So rates for a public utility should make the product available to all and bill those that use the product - the more you use the higher the rate. It would keep leaks repaired - it would end useless running of water - it would actually conserve water - a shrinking natural resource.