

# Clean Water: Worth not measured in dollars

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AHOSKIE – What's the price of one gallon of water provided by the Town of Ahoskie?

Better yet, how much would you be willing to pay to guarantee that gallon of water is safe for consumption?

The answer to both questions is exactly the same.

In the last of a two-part series, the Roanoke-Chowan News-Herald is publishing the Town of Ahoskie's response to raising the monthly fees on water and sewer services effective in July of last year. Even an adjustment in those rates, approved by the town council in August, did little to calm the critics, some of whom continue to lobby Ahoskie's leaders to lower the water/sewer rates.

In Thursday's edition, it was reported that a \$17.87 million upgrade to Ahoskie's wastewater treatment plant, a project currently underway and scheduled for completion in January of next year, will nearly double the town's wastewater capacity that, in turn, will open the door for economic growth.

Today, Ahoskie Public Works Director Kirk Rogers gives his point of view on the town's water service, one he presented on Tuesday at the monthly meeting of the Ahoskie Town Council.

Water is free; infrastructure is not

As Rogers accurately pointed out at Tuesday's council meeting, there's an abundance of water lying just below ground level. While that product is there for the taking, there are costs associated with pumping it from the earth, treating, storing and delivering clean, healthy water to those using it on a daily basis.

Rogers stated that the Town of Ahoskie's water infrastructure includes 33 miles of distribution lines, 2,400 taps, eight wells (with ground storage tanks) and two elevated storage tanks.

Perhaps the most important part of that municipal system is the long checklist of tests performed on the water.

According to Rogers, Ahoskie's water is tested daily for chlorine residuals; monthly for coliform and fecal bacteria and quarterly/annually for over 120 contaminants. All, said Rogers, meet extremely stringent state and federal regulations.

"We are proud to serve the town's citizens and businesses with clean, potable drinking water," Rogers said. "We are also proud that our water is used for many necessities at our hospital, dialysis centers and many other businesses that require clean, safe water to serve their patients and the public. While public health is at the forefront of our existence, our water meets many demands such as these on a daily basis."

As it is with providing any type of public service, there are challenges facing the Ahoskie municipal water system. Rogers pointed to unfunded mandates, leadership changes and maintenance of an aging infrastructure, just to name a few.

"Water and sewer lines are not seen by the public and therefore are not often thought about enough to know and understand how it works and where their water is coming from," Rogers said.

Rogers said he was of the opinion "that society has become spoiled, so to speak, on the issue and many don't understand why they have to pay for water."

"I've always said that water is free," he continued. "What you're paying for is the pumping of the wells, the maintenance and repair of the distribution lines, how the pressure is constantly maintained in those lines, fire protection, treating the water – all the sampling and testing we're required to perform – and the personnel and administrative costs to maintain the entire system."

Rogers noted this was all done in an effort to, "have the peace of mind that you won't get sick and/or possibly die from drinking water from your very own faucet."

How much does it cost?

Using a gallon of water purchased from a local supermarket as a prop, Rogers asked his audience of what they thought water was worth.

"I purchased this gallon of water from Food Lion for 99 cents," Rogers said. "Now, if you took an empty one gallon jug and placed it under a water tap served by the Town of Ahooskie, that exact same amount would cost you between 1.3 cents and 1.8 cents, depending on if you are a residential or commercial customer. And that price includes the sewer costs, meaning you could pour that gallon of water down your sink and not pay any more."

He claimed that those manufacturing bottled water for retail sale were, "continuing to rake in the money."

"The cost of bottled water is staggering," he noted. "This one gallon jug was 99 cents. If you want the convenience of a smaller container, a 20-ounce bottle of water will cost between \$1.50 and \$2."

Another difference, Rogers said, is that bottled water is not regulated like water from a municipal system.

"Over 22 percent of the (bottled water) brands that have been tested had at least one sample with chemical contaminant levels above the strict state limits," Rogers stressed. "Bacteria are prone to exist as well. Also, the bottles themselves have been found to be a health risk due to the plastic it's made from."

Face-to-face with complaints

Rogers closed his presentation by commending Ahooskie's elected leaders for standing tall in the face of adversity.

"Those who are upset with the (water/sewer) rates do not have a faceless 1-800 number to call and complain; they have confronted you with those complaints," Rogers told the council members. "You have felt the brunt of this, but the public needs to know and understand of the underlying issues that Ahooskie and every town and city that operates a municipal water system faces day after day, year after year."

Rogers said those issues are the same ones he had already covered....maintaining an aging system without compromising public health.

"We never need to lose sight of our responsibility to maintain our infrastructure and continue to provide safe and clean water."

What is that worth to you?