

Malta's city water off limits

BY KIM SKORNOGOSKI • TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER • APRIL 20, 2010

Malta residents were told to avoid using city water — not for drinking, cooking, washing or even flushing — after someone broke into a secured area around the town's two tanks sometime Saturday.

Whether it was a bit of tomfoolery or a terrorist attack, the state ordered that no water be used until the state Water Protection Bureau of the Department of Environmental Quality can run a battery of tests to make sure the water is safe.

Phillips County Sheriff Tom Miller said officers found an open beer container and an empty energy drink can inside the fence. A ladder that normally is propped against the building was found leaning against the inside of the 6-foot barbed wire-lined fence. Apparently it was used to escape.

City employees check the 400,000- and 176,000-gallon tanks daily and spotted a cut in the fence Sunday morning.

Malta Public Works Director John Demarais warned people through the radio and posted signs on billboards around town.

Residents swarmed the town's Albertson's, buying up all the water on hand. Many leaned on out-of-town friends who have wells, using their toilets and showers.

Nursing home employees traveled 40 miles to Harlem to get their water supplies and switched to serving meals on paper plates.

It was decided to close schools Monday and today, but students will return Wednesday regardless of whether water has been cleared for use.

"This has been a mess," said Jan Harns, who owns Jan's Floral & Greenhouse. She keeps a couple of five-gallon jugs of water on hand for emergencies, but others were out of luck until the city began providing bottled water Monday morning.

"We grew up in tough times, so I've always been a firm believer in being prepared," Harns said. "Still it can get pretty expensive using bottled water for floral arrangements."

The state DEQ expects preliminary test results as soon as Tuesday evening, but final results could take a week.

In the meantime, Malta may be able to flush water from its city pipes and then rely on four wells.

"We ran bacteria tests on the tank and the system," Demarais said. "The list of tests for chemicals is a mile long. It's very, very time-intensive. Fortunately, people have been very, very understanding."

Some restaurants closed, but at the Great Northern Hotel employees scrambled to keep business flowing. Because the restaurant's coffee pot is hooked directly into the water system, a waitress brought in hers from home.

"We adapt here," hotel owner Tim Spear said. "It's a small town. We figure out how to get 'er done."

A few people canceled reservations at the hotel, but others already staying in the rooms had few complaints. Spear said one decided to shower anyway.

Until the wells are up and running, people can get free water at the new public works building.

Miller said he has no suspects yet, but the FBI is involved in the investigation. Tampering with city water supplies is potentially a federal offense.

"If it was just a prank or somebody breaking in there to drink beer, they could face some pretty serious charges," Miller said.