

Now for the “Rest of the Story”



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Last month I described how I came to work with the City of Cocoa Utilities. For 33 years I enjoyed working on many projects alongside many wonderful coworkers. In addition to those directly employed by Cocoa, I also worked with engineering consulting firms and state regulatory agencies. I found almost all of the engineers and regulators to be professional, highly intelligent, and very conscientious about their work.

Let me take just a moment to explain to those who aren't too familiar with this utility. The water reclamation plant and reclaimed system are regional, serving both inside and outside the city limits. About 75 percent of the customers reside in the city; however, the water system is quite different, as it serves all of central Brevard County, with less than 10 percent of its customers within the Cocoa city limits.

The cities of Rockledge, Cape Canaveral, and Cocoa Beach, as well as the unincorporated areas, are supplied with Cocoa water. The Disney ships and other cruise lines at Port Canaveral fill up their vessels with Cocoa water. The launches at Kennedy Space Center cool their pads with Cocoa water. Videos of the shuttle launches broadcast around the world show a bellowing white cloud expanding at ground level of Cocoa water turning to steam. When NASA's Apollo program took men to the moon, some of the water making the landing went through Cocoa Utilities' treatment plant.

Cocoa Utilities gets its raw water supply from both groundwater and surface water. The groundwater comes from wells located over 20 miles inland from the ocean. Even this far inland, wells are still constructed and operated to control saltwater intrusion, primarily from below, which is known as upconing. The surface water source is from Taylor Creek Reservoir, constructed by the Army Corps of Engineers (ACOE) as part of a flood control and water supply project in the 1960s.

Throughout my time at Cocoa Utilities, I had many opportunities to interact with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Florida Department of Environmental Protection, and ACOE for projects related to wetland impacts, consumptive use, water supply and plant construction permits, and operational issues. Oftentimes, the Utilities' engineering consultants were involved in these same issues. One thing that was quite evident to me was that each entity, utility, consultant, and regulator looked at an issue primarily from his or her perspective.

A utility extracts, treats, and distributes water to its customers. It's on the front line dealing with budgets, customers, treatment, personnel, infrastructure, equipment, regulations, demand management, water quality, sustainability, capital expansion, growth, etc. It utilizes consultants to perform those larger, more complicated functions that in-house staff aren't geared to handle.

In Florida, engineering consultants are hired through a legal process in accordance with the Consultants Competitive Negotiations Act (CCNA). Consultants work within a project budget, meeting sometimes previously unknown constraints from both their client and regulators—and at times working 50- and 60-hour work weeks, including weekends. As technology changes, so do they. Their designs must be “permissible,” constructible, cost-effective, and operator-friendly. Their engineer's estimate can't be lower than the lowest responsible bidder's price.

Both the utility and its consultant conduct their work under the watchful eye of environmental regulators, who know and enforce the rules established to provide protection for the environment and the customers of the utility. They're oftentimes put in the middle and blamed for cost escalation. Their permit conditions oftentimes don't appear to add value, just cost. Their input is often welcomed as much as the flashing blue light in a car's rearview mirror.

With each entity playing a specific role, at times there are occasions for disagreement. For those who have encountered such disagreements, you might say my description is much too mild. I agree. Sometimes the disagreements take on a life of their own and legal professionals may have to get in-

involved. It can get very complicated, very messy, very time-consuming, and very expensive.

Early in my career I recognized this phenomenon, and took the occasion to mention to many people working in one of these three roles that the water industry would probably be much better served if throughout one's career, water professionals switched to one of the other two—perhaps every five to 10 years—and then switched again to the remaining role. My thought here is that not having firsthand knowledge of what each of us does in our role as utility employee, consultant, or regulator, we probably have a tendency to not fully understand what the others do and the ramifications of our actions and how they affect everyone. Perhaps misunderstandings, multiple communications, requests for information (RFI), multiple change orders, wasted time and resources, etc., could be greatly reduced or even eliminated if each of us better understood what “the other people” were dealing with.

Now I work for the St. Johns River Water Management District (SJRMD). As you can tell, I didn't change roles every five to 10 years; I haven't met too many who have. It hasn't been easy, but it's been very eye-opening. I already had a great deal of respect for many employees with the District, and I've come to learn more closely that my respect was well-deserved. Balancing environmental concerns with water supply and flood control in a state prone to hurricanes, periodic droughts, and fires is no easy task, but a very necessary one. The SJRWMD does it so very well.

It may not be practical for many to make such a career change, but I do believe our industry would be better for it. In lieu of it ever becoming more common, I'd recommend that each of you working for a utility, consultant, or regulator, or in sales or construction, do your best to understand issues from more than your own perspective. Seek resolutions that are fair to—and right for—all parties. Put aside selfish desires of your own and work toward tempering them with those in your upper management. Really care about each other.

Try to have fun doing it as well—and as Paul Harvey would say, “That's the rest of the story.”