

Superior Water doing well

The little fish that could

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The EPA estimates the U.S. is short \$265 billion needed to upgrade the nation's water infrastructure, much of which is 100 years old or older. Nicholas DeBenedictis, CEO of Aqua America, argues only large private companies have the financial resources to accomplish this. Above, a new water line is installed on South Hanover Street in North Coventry. Superior Water is considering the construction of new wells in New Hanover. At right, a new water tower is erected outside East Greenville.

Photos by John Strickler/The Mercury

WORCESTER — Once considered a major player in Montgomery County, Superior Water Co. is fast becoming a little fish in a widening pond.

Like many of Pennsylvania's water companies, Superior began out of a developer's frustration.

Wholly owned by the Gambone development family, Superior was formed because the developers "got tired of drilling wells for each house they built," said Bob Braglio, who has been the company's manager of operations for 15 years.

"Fifteen years ago, (Gambone) was the big builder, now they're the smallest," said Braglio.

Locally, the company's franchise area — dictated by the Public Utility Commission — includes Upper Pottsgrove, New Hanover, Douglass (Mont.), a small system in West Chester, water for the Coventry Mall and a small system for the Worcester Centre Point Village townhouses, adjacent to its offices.

The company has five wells throughout northwestern Montgomery County and is considering three more.

Superior's average well is 350 feet deep and, with one million gallons of storage in three tanks, Superior can supply its customers with water for two days without pumping.

"The (Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection) likes you to have one day's storage, but if you're smart, you have more than one," Braglio said.

"We don't have any wells with fantastic amounts, but we've got good supplies," he said. "If we can put enough in storage, we don't need a lot of wells."

Right now the company is looking at an area in New Hanover "that's the equivalent of an underground lake," Braglio said.

It's a good place to look considering that town has "6,000 houses ready to be built," Braglio said.

"What's holding us up in New Hanover is sewer. Don't ever let anyone tell you water controls growth, sewer controls growth," said Braglio who, prior to his time with Superior, worked for Pennsylvania American Water Co. for 31 years.

In all, the map on the company wall shows 23 proposed developments, so it shouldn't come as a surprise that Superior's business is "99 percent residential." Rather than resent developer/water companies like his, people should recognize the benefits, Braglio argued.

"There was a time when you had 3,000 homes, that meant you had 3,000 straws in the ground," he said. "At least with us, it's only two straws and you can keep an eye on how much is coming out."

In addition to the PUC, Superior is also governed by the Delaware River Basin Commission which enacted Pennsylvania's only "ground water protected area" throughout all of Montgomery County, and portions of Chester, Berks and Bucks counties.

"The Gambones have been smart enough to get this up and running and do it right," Braglio.

Still it hasn't been easy. "It's all capital expense in the beginning."

And it can be tough to make that money back when, unlike a water authority, Superior cannot force anyone to hook into its system, cannot charge a "tap-in fee" and the PUC prohibits the cost of new extensions being spread among current customers.

"We've been at this for 15 years and two years ago was the first time we made it into the black," said Braglio.

And who knows how long Superior may be with us.

Large water companies like Aqua America are aggressively buying up companies like Superior.

"A guy from Aqua America calls about every six months and asks if we're interested in selling," Braglio said with a laugh.

"The old guys won't sell, but who knows?" Braglio said. "I suppose it's like the family farm, once the sons take over, they might be more interested in selling."