



Imagine a Day Without Water

September 15, 2016

We have all experienced the frustration of bone-rattling potholes or traffic back-ups from emergency road repairs on a hot summer day. It's maddening, expensive, and it has become commonplace to demand public officials step up to fix it. Now keep those potholes and traffic jams in mind, but picture a separate, hidden infrastructure system that is larger and, in some cases, a hundred years older than those roads and bridges. You can't see it, but it ensures we are able to go about our daily routines without a second thought. It keeps our food growing, our manufacturing plants humming, and the lights on in our houses and offices.

These are our water and wastewater systems – underground, out of sight and out of mind. But they work 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year, to bring clean, safe water to us and take it away after we use it to be treated before it is safely released back into the environment. Unlike the potholed roads you see on your daily commute, these systems – many of which were built for the America of a century ago, not modern metropolises and sprawling supply chains – don't show their age as easily. But a broken water system is absolutely devastating.

What happens when these systems fail to keep up with our needs? Imagine a day without water. You would not be able to give your dog a bowl of water or make your coffee. Forget about brushing your teeth, flushing the toilet or taking a shower. And that is just residential use. Commercial enterprises, from breweries to hospitals, factories to power plants, carwashes to aquariums, need water, too.

Too many communities around the America have already experienced how terrible life is without safe, reliable water service. Of course the catastrophe in Flint, Michigan comes to mind, as well as other communities facing broken infrastructure that taints water supplies and leaves residents fearful. Beach goers along the Great Lakes are accustomed to seeing beach closure signs because untreated sewage overflows make water unsafe for swimming. New Orleans' residents routinely have "boil water advisories." In the last year, residents from South Carolina to West Virginia lost water and wastewater service because of terrible flooding. And communities experiencing epic drought in the Central Valley of California have literally relocated residents because their wells have run dry. These communities know that a day without water is a crisis.

It's why we at the South Tahoe Public Utility District are taking part in a nationwide educational effort called "Imagine a Day Without Water." Hundreds of organizations across the country, including water agencies, mayors, engineers, contractors, business and labor leaders, schools, and other community organizations are joining forces to raise public awareness and spark action to solve water and wastewater problems today, before they become a crisis tomorrow.

And while water falls from the sky and flows through our rivers, it is far from free. Processing it, treating it, bringing it to and from your house costs the South Tahoe Public Utility District millions of dollars a

year. Here in South Lake Tahoe, we are also required by law to export all of our treated waste water out of the basin. So, the more water that's used indoors, the more waste water that must be treated and pumped over Luther Pass and into Alpine County.

The good news is that if we make adjustments before the most expensive repairs, we can be ahead of the curve. Through continually maintaining the system, by upgrading our pipes and deploying new technologies that spot weaknesses before they turn into breaks, we can save money in the long run, prevent disruptions to daily life, and protect the health of our citizens and economy.

It also requires effort and attention from community leaders, elected officials, business owners, workers, and more. Without strong voices advocating for this work, our water systems will continue to be out of site and out of mind. We have to keep up the pressure to address issues with our water and wastewater systems today so South Lake Tahoe can imagine a day without water if we need to, but we never have to live through it.