Broken Meter Ruling Sought

Water Bureau Faces Chaotic Conditions

By JOHN G. McCULLOUGH
Of The Bulletin Staff

The city will make another move to unsnarl a legal tangle which has left it unable to repair 36,000 broken water meters.

At the insistence of water and tax officials, it was learned yesterday, city attorneys are preparing to push for a final decision from the courts on the city's right to purchase only those repair parts manufactured by the makers of the meters.

A successful challenge to that curb more than two years ago by an independent parts dealer brought a court order banning any restriction in the city's specifications. The same order also prohibited the payment of purchases made on that basis.

Meanwhile, the water bureau's meter-repair shop at 29th and Cambria sts. has been swamped with a gradually increasing backlog of broken meters. Repair parts manufacturers, fearing they would not be be paid for materials delivered, have ignored the city's requests for bids.

Owners Urged to Buy Parts

In some instances, it was learned, water bureau officials have suggested that the property owners themselves purchase needed repair parts from the manufacturers and arrange for their shipment to the city shop. This method, officials admitted, has caused considerable confusion and has resulted in many complaints.

Since the majority of homes in the city are billed for water used on the basis of meter readings, tax office officials pointed out, the continued break-down of more than 15 per cent of these devices has caused "almost chaos" in the preparation of bills.

The almost complete lack of repair parts, while it principally affects the home type of meters, is also blocking the repair of more than 1,000 large industrial and commercial meters. One large plant, it was disclosed recently had to pay back water costs of $600,000 when its meter was finally repaired and reinstalled.

Meter Repairs Blocked

"This situation," one official said, "is disgusting to us since it makes for extremely poor relations between the consumer and the water bureau, especially at a time when we are working for the installation of meters all over the city."

Director of Supplies and Purchases Charles H. Gragelow first inaugurated the procedure of purchasing only those parts which were made by the meter manufacturers. This system, he said, would prevent the stocking of inferior or non-fitting parts and save an estimated $15,000 a year.

On the appeal of the independent dealer, however, the court held that the city had no right to restrict the bidding to parts made by one manufacturer or any group of manufacturers. Such action, the court warned, might be met by Federal anti-trust proceedings.

This decision, in May, 1944, also enjoined the City Controller from permitting payment for contracts predicated on such restrictions and warned that he would risk contempt proceedings in disobeying the decree.

Clarification Sought

[illegible]ction was taken during the [illegible] of former controller Robert [illegible]e, and last March the present [illegible]ller, Frank J. Tiemann, asked [illegible] a clarification of the courts [illegible]. At this time there was an est[illegible] 24,000 unrepaired meters and water bureau officials were clamoring for some action to break the bottleneck.

Although Judge Gerald F. Flood did issue a further opinion it caused a wide difference of interpretation between two branches of the city government as to its meaning.

METERS, METERS EVERYWHERE AND NOT A DROP OF WATER

Stockpile of city water meters in disrepair mounts at Water Bureau's repair shop at 29th and Cambria sts.

400 Mains Here Break in Year

Some Have Been in Service Since 1819

Philadelphia averages 400 water main breaks a year, and while it does not have the worst record per mile in this respect in comparison with other cities, it is in the higher bracket.

One reason is the age of the city, which has some water mains that have been in service since 1819. Figures in the office of Elbert J. Taylor, chief of the Bureau of Water, show 401 breaks during 1946, and 317 low-pressure and 3 high-pressure breaks so far this year. There were 531 breaks of low pressure mains giving domestic service in 1945, with 13 breaks in the high-pressure fire-fighting system.

"The chief cause of breaks," Taylor said yesterday, "is the tremendous increases in the weight of street loads. The consequent jars and heavy settlement, with resulting breaks, are mostly caused by heavy trucks.

Trolley cars are a contributing cause, because the water pipes in most instances were laid before the cars went into service, and often lie beneath the tracks, especially at street intersections.

"Water pipe is designed to stand a pressure of 100 pounds, although we do not go that high. No pipes burst from internal pressure. There is however, settlement at the joints, then come traffic jars, a limit is reached and the pipe breaks.

"Of course, raising of pressure hastens the time for the break. This year breaks have been more numerous north of Arch st. in the central city, probably due to the cleaning and lining with cement of the large steel mains in the northeast, thus cutting down the friction, and raising the minimum pressures.

"Before we are through we will line all our 36-inch and 48-inch steel mains laid between 1908 and 1912, when the filtration plants were installed, about 1,000 feet in all.

"In all the new pipes we are laying, we take into account increased shocks, such as given by a 20-ton truck traveling at high speed. We are not only putting in heavier pipe, but we are giving more careful supervision, especially of the work of the public utilities, when they lay conduits.

"We have had five breaks this year where utilities laid masonry beside mains. We now insist that a composition expansion joint material be placed around the water pipe."

Water Tax Rise Urged for City Improvements

If Philadelphians want a better city, they probably are going to have to pay higher sewer and water assessments.

That was the prospect presented by the City Planning Commission yesterday in its annual report to Mayor Samuel.

The report suggested expenditures of $322,792,789 for public improvements during the next six years.

It also disclosed that the commission is about to certify nine areas of the city for redevelopment into more desirable business and residential districts.

May Attract from Suburbs

When such redevelopment occurs—and it is expected to be accomplished largely through private capital—the outflow of Philadelphia's population into the suburbs may be reversed, because the city will be a better place in which to live, work and play.

Mayor Samuel is expected to transmit the commission's report to Council at its next session. The suggestion for higher taxes did not come as a surprise to him. Edward Hopkinson, Jr., commission chairman, is known to have conferred with the Mayor in advance on the report.

In addition to advising the increased assessments, the report suggested that water meters be installed in all homes. At present, only about half of the city's dwellings are metered. Thus there is a revenue loophole; also, hundreds of thousands of gallons of water are wasted because, without a meter, there is less incentive to be economical.

Expects Palatable Water

Hopkinson's report expresses a belief that an adequate supply of odorless and palatable water "should be a reality within a few years."

He admits that this may sound like the repetition of an old promise, but he offers data to show that something actually is being done. New pumping stations are being built at Torresdale and Fox Chase, and other stations are being rehabilitated. Ozonation equipment is going into the Belmont treatment station. Filters and reservoirs are being rehabilitated and new mains are being laid down.

This work—$32,407,000 is earmarked for the water supply during the next six years—is partly in the nature of an experiment to see if the water can be improved without acquiring a new source. One possible new source would be the Delaware river at Wallpack Bend, near Bushkill, Pa. The commission thinks this site should be pre-empted, just in case the experiments should fail.

Six-Year Schedule

For purposes of planning and financing, the commission operates on a six-year schedule. Each year this schedule is revised. The $322,792,789 expenditure recommended for 1948-53 is $20,303,000 above that proposed for 1947-52.

Besides the waterworks projects in the 1948-53 schedule, principal objectives concern sewers and sewage treatment, highways, airports, recreation facilities, hospitals and welfare institutions.

"Dirt already is flying, contracts are being let, plans are being drawn," says the report. During 1948, an estimated $72,677,609 will have to be spent to keep the projects on schedule.

Because of rising cost, the commission is scheduling only projects which is considers to be urgent.

How Planning Board Wants City to Spend

How the City Planning Commission would allocate the $322,793,000 which is suggests spending during 1948-1953:

Sewerage	$95,485,000
Water improvements	32,407,000
City-State highways	38,744,000
City arterial highways and bridges	9,322,000
City highway restoration	26,600,000
Airports	28,315,000
Transit	32,397,000
Traffic control	3,208,000
Recreation	13,688,000
Hospitals, health centers	15,545,000
Port improvements	3,044,000
Police, fire, electrical bureaus	7,582,000
Refuse disposal	4,904,000
Charitable, correctional, penal institutions	10,382,000
Libraries, museums and others	1,170,000

Main Break Hits Southwest Area

Inquirer 11-13-47

Water Cut in Two Hospitals And Thousands of Homes

Thousands of homes, two hospitals and scores of industrial plants in most of Southwest Philadelphia were virtually without water last night as a result of a 48-inch main break on Warrington ave. south of 56th st.

At St. Vincent's Hospital, 70th st. and Woodland ave., 400 infant patients faced a heatless night when low pressure caused the failure of the heating system, but were finally kept warm by hastily gathered electric heaters.

The break occurred at 8:30 A. M. yesterday and Elbert Taylor, chief of the Water Bureau, said it would take until this morning to repair the damage.

The water pressure in Mercy Hospital was down to a trickle in the basement throughout the day and orderlies carried water to the upper floors of the three-story building in buckets. The nurses' home was without water entirely the superintendent said.

BOILERS ENDANGERED

The engineer at the hospital said that if the water pressure got any lower the boilers in the hospital would have to be turned off. Large industrial plants in the area, including the huge General Electric Co. plant at 68th st. and Elmwood ave., were faced with the same situation.

Some of them closed their water mains in the afternoon so that residents could obtain a supply from 16 and 30-inch emergency feeder lines rushed into service by the Water Bureau.

Elbert Taylor, chief of the Water Bureau, immediately after the break occurred at 8:30 A. M., dispatched all available repairmen to the location of the break. They were expected to have the damage repaired by this morning, Taylor said.

He added that the break reduced the pressure "lower than anticipated demand."

"You see, we haven't had a break in that section for quite a number of years," he said. "We thought that the 16 and 30-inch feeder lines would be able to take care of the situation, but with the industries using water in their boilers it became too much of a drain to supply the homes."

PRESSURE REDUCED

He said that he was informed that many plants shut their boilers down in the afternoon. The pressure, he contined, was reduced to about 15 pounds in one section, which is not enough to carry it to the upper floors of homes. The normal pressure, he declared is 100 pounds.

The main where the break occurred is one of two large feeder lines supplying West Philadelphia, Taylor said. The other line, a 40-inchen running under 52d st., also was put into emergency service.

SPOUTS LIKE A GEYSER

The water from the break spouted like a geyser from the pavement adjacent to the curb line in front of the homes of Mrs. Emma Sinclair at 1516 S. 56th st., and Mrs. C. W. Adams, at 1514 S. 56th st.

Water which gushed from the break in enormous quantities raised the sidewalk in front of the two homes about eight inches. It overflowed the sidewalk and rushed over a small retaining wall in front of the lawns of Mrs. Sinclair's and Mrs. Adams' homes, and washed away part of their lawns.

Tons of water also cascaded down an incline on 56th st. for two block to Florence ave., where some sections were covered from curb to curb because of backed-up sewers. No homes were reported flooded in the area.

[illegible]HINE IN 32D ST. AREA

The area most seriously affected [illegible]s that of 32d st. and Eastwick ave. [illegible]here water was not to be had even [illegible]om firephugs. Officers of Engine [illegible] and Truck 26, at 62d st. and Tinicum ave., said, however, that they were prepared to fight small fires that might break out.

Apparatus of both companies is equipped with auxiliary booster tanks containing hundred of gallons of water, as is that of Engine 68, at 50th st. and Baltimore ave.

Also affected by the water scarcity was the police station at 65th st. and Woodland ave.

Late in the afternoon about 50 housewives, armed with buckets and pots, lined up in front of a firepug at 67th st. and Paschall ave. and filled their containers, assisted by police. Similar scenes took place throughout the affected section.

CARRY WATER TO FIRE

Last night firemen from 50th st. and Baltimore ave carried water in a 100-gallon booster tank with a pumper to put out a fire in an automobile at Cobbs Creek Parkway and Hoffman st.

Philadelphia Water Department
Historical Collection
2004.019.0023A