

# Water customers paid more for water they conserved

By Tom Shevlin

The year 2007 may be remembered by Jamestown's water customers as the year they paid more for something they are not buying.

In August, for the second time in three years, the Jamestown Town Council, sitting as the Water and Sewer Commission, voted to increase island water rates by 15 percent for minimum use, and 23 percent for excess use.

For Jamestown, like other island communities, water quality and availability is central to issues such as zoning and development. But for island water rate payers, it has also become a key issue in determining monthly budgets.

Past town councils have spent countless hours debating and trying to get a handle on the town's delicate water supply, and the next council is likely to do the same.

The problem Jamestown rate payers now face was ironically brought on by the town's own success. Over the last ten years, town officials have engaged in an extensive overhaul of the island's water infrastructure through costly measures such as installing an island pipeline, adding a second water tower, and approving extensive renovations to the town's water treatment facility. The results are notable, with Jamestown ranking at the top of the state in terms of water conservation. Yet in the face of reduced water consumption and increased costs, councilors will be charged in 2008 with how to

bring the island's water rates under control.

One possible solution is instituting an island-wide tax based on the "intrinsic value" of the town's water infrastructure, whether residents' homes are connected to the town water supply or not. Heading into the New Year, Councilor Robert Sutton broached the idea, prompting town officials to begin examining such a possibility.

Also ongoing has been the town's effort to develop former town office space at 44 Southwest Ave. into affordable housing. The building, which falls under the assets of the Jamestown Water Board, has been identified by prominent developer Church Community Housing (CCH) as a prime site for development in order to meet its state-mandated affordable housing goals. In June, CCH's bid for a state affordable

housing grant was passed over until the plan was further developed.

Meanwhile, in May, Town Administrator Bruce Keiser reported to the council that Jamestown's emergency water needs could not be met by surrounding communities for either a short-term or long-term basis under current agreements.

In June, the Rhode Island State Water Resources Board voted to

rule the Jamestown Water Department in non-compliance because required water supply data had been overdue. Town officials vociferously disputed the ruling claiming that the state had arrived at its conclusions based on faulty statistics. Soon thereafter, in August, Jamestown was one of six Rhode Island communities ordered by the federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to take steps to stop harmful raw sewage from discharging from municipal pipes and wastewater systems into state waterways.

Keiser said that the order reflected illegal house sump pumps, poor practices of disposal of grease by downtown food establishments, and deficiencies at the wastewater treatment plant.

Earlier this month, Jamestown narrowly averted a potential water crisis after a malfunction at the water treatment plant forced the facility's closure for more than two days. Public Works Director Steve Goslee said that the fortuitous timing of the water tank coming online provided an example of the importance of redundancy in a system that has recently undergone a multimillion-dollar renovation.

Projects to look for in 2008, to be addressed by the Water and Sewer Commission, include continued renovations to the water treatment plant, further exploration of the Southwest Avenue development, and an attempt to bring the island's water rate under control.



### Watching over their flocks

Boy Scouts Nick Hanson, left, and Sam DiGasper played shepherds in the annual Jamestown Christmas Pageant.

Photo by Andrea von Hohenleiten

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