latimes.com

STEVE LOPEZ

Awash in water trouble, it's time to spout off at DWP

For some customers, bills are rising faster than a gusher from a broken main.

Steve Lopez

September 16, 2009

Until further notice, it might be wise to carry a life preserver with you at all times in Greater Los Angeles, which had yet another water main eruption early Tuesday.

It's like a geyser park out there, and fittingly, the latest gusher was near an L.A. Department of Water and Power distribution station in South Los Angeles.

Where and when will the next one blow?

I'm visualizing a news conference at which Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa tries to explain the DWP's latest troubles or persuade us he can avert a city budget disaster, and suddenly he's shooting skyward, riding a gusher.

But even before rotten pipes gave way to raging rivers, I was working on a column about the DWP. I was working on it before the City Council rejected yet another rate hike request, before Villaraigosa buddy Fabian Nuñez's PR firm was tapped for a $120,000 annual contract, and yes, even before the news that another Villaraigosa pal swept in and bought a wind farm that the mayor wanted and then tried to sell it to the city at an inflated price.

It began with a seven-page letter from JoAnn Yuster of North Hollywood, who was steaming about how she and her husband were using less water but paying more for it. Her letter was loaded with quotation marks and exclamation points, and the handwriting got worse as she picked up speed.

"P.S.," she wrote. "I am really not a crazy lady. Just angry at what has happened to our city & state!!!"

When I went to visit JoAnn and Richard Yuster, their neighbor Beth Morgan dropped by, and they all took turns complaining about their ever-growing DWP bills.

"My husband said it's like another mortgage payment," said Morgan, whose $927 DWP bill for July and August was the same amount, almost to the penny, as her Social Security check.

Morgan said she called the DWP to complain that it was difficult to understand the bill, as well as the explanation of a two-tier billing system that's in effect because of the drought.

"They said, 'You don't gotta understand it, you just gotta pay the bill,' " said Morgan, whose husband is a TV producer who works intermittently. "They said, 'Honey, nobody understands this.' "

DWP did send an explanation to the Yusters, but language such as, "Your first tier allowance (usage block) will be reduced by 15%," doesn't exactly make things crystal-clear. Imagine thousands of seniors training a magnifying glass

on words like those, trying to make sense of what the DWP is telling them now.

What was perfectly clear to Yuster was the fact that, this year in July and August she used 25% less water than she did last year during the same period. She's pretty sure she paid less last year, despite the greater usage, but she couldn't find the bill to prove it. She did find her bill from two years ago, though. Then, she used 14% more water than she did this year, yet her water bill was $56.42 less. Add in electric, sewer, the city utility tax, solid resources fee and the state energy surcharge, and this year's bill was $783.80 for July and August versus $417.29 for the same period two years ago.

Like the Morgans, the Yusters downsized in recent years, moving to a less expensive neighborhood to prepare for retirement that now seems impossible to consider. At 69, Richard Yuster is still working two jobs in the garment industry, and 66-year-old JoAnn works as a school registrar. They don't see an end in sight. Don't misunderstand, Richard says, they're not poor. They're just fed up about rising costs, corporate greed and political corruption.

Yuster swallowed his teeth over a recent Times story about six-figure pensions and cost-of-living increases for 841 former city employees, including $327,000 a year for a former DWP general manager and $290,000 for an assistant general manager.

He nearly choked when the state's high-speed rail commission, dominated by Gov. Schwarzenegger appointees, preliminarily picked a company led by two former Schwarzenegger cronies as likely recipients of a $9-million PR contract.

And he recently found out the burial plots he bought for himself and his wife might be gone, thanks to the demise of the company he bought burial insurance from.

"What can we do?" he asked. "There's nothing to do. We keep working."

Yuster said he and his wife have always supported social services for those less fortunate than themselves.

"But I can't even pay for myself anymore," he said.

"We're middle America," his wife added. "We're the backbone of this country and you wonder what's happening."

The Yusters have lots of good questions and legitimate beefs. But when I looked into their situation, I learned that although they've definitely cut back, they're still using quite a bit of water. I compared it with my own bill, for a house roughly the same size as the Yusters', and I'm using less than half as much water.

Joe Ramallo, a DWP spokesman, said 68% of the agency's clients stayed within their Tier 1 limits, which come to roughly 326 gallons of water a day. The Yusters, who used 748 gallons daily on average, ended up paying a big surcharge for exceeding the limit. It's possible they've got a leak, said Ramallo, who offered to send workers out to check. He also said DWP would pay $1 for every square foot of landscaping the Yusters convert to native plants.

Richard Yuster said his front lawn, which he waters twice a week, may indeed be the culprit and he's considered ripping it out to go native. But indoors, he said, the Yusters are taking short showers, washing dishes in a small tub and turning off the spigot while brushing teeth.

Given drought conditions, we all need to do a better job.

And so do DWP and the mayor.

Villaraigosa's goal of making renewable energy 40% of the DWP supply by 2010 is commendable, but as with his bungled solar energy plan, he seems more concerned about getting credit for an idea than making it a reality. My colleague Dave Zahniser had a nifty little example in the paper on Tuesday, and while reading it, I was slapping myself in the forehead.

The city was eyeing some land in Kern County on which it wanted to put a wind farm, but then a former campaign

fundraiser and pal of the mayor grabbed it for $48 million. Since he didn't need it all, he graciously offered to sell half of it to the city for -- are you ready for this? -- $65 million. The city said no, so thank your lucky stars for that. Then the guy sold it to the city of Vernon for $42 million, and now the mayor's minions are wondering whether to buy the land or sue Vernon.

So, what should we do? Laugh? Cry? Call for an investigation?

I say all of the above.

Meanwhile, the DWP may ask for rate increases to cover the recent water main breaks. We've also had electricity rate hikes every three months for the last three years, and now DWP is rewriting its request for another hike. As Councilwoman Jan Perry said two weeks ago, we're tired of handing a "blank check" to the DWP for a renewable energy plan with few details and no known cost.

Sure, wind farms would be swell. But shouldn't we fix the broken water mains first, before we're commuting to work by canoe?

steve.lopez@latimes.com

Copyright © 2009, The Los Angeles Times