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Small, private water company in Edgemont keeps taps flowing

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By LAURIE LUCAS
The Press-Enterprise

Despite aging pipes and low-pressure hydrants that hamper firefighting, the privately owned Box Springs Mutual Water Co. has stubbornly moved into the 21st century to continue serving Moreno Valley's Edgemont area.

The 89-year-old utility continues to deliver water despite little help from the state or city. The last state grant the utility received for upgrades was a quarter century ago. City and water-company officials both say they can't afford to pay to overhaul the aging system.

And building developers, whose fees could have helped upgrade the system, bypassed Edgemont during the last housing boom.

Story continues below

Box Springs Mutual Water Co. operations manager Henry Johnson climbs one of the utility's two water storage tanks to check the water level. The private utility serves Moreno Valley's Edgemont area.

Box Springs officials recently wrestled with another dilemma: whether to raise rates for its 3,300 customers to offset a 27 percent hike in the cost of water the company buys from Western Municipal Water District of Riverside County.

Consumers narrowly dodged a bullet Wednesday when the board of directors rejected the rate increase in a 3-2 vote.

"They all live in Edgemont themselves," General Manager Debby Sutton said. "They had heartfelt reasons."

As a small, rural company owned by shareholders, Box Springs has soldiered on independently since property owners banded together when the Edgemont tract was laid out and subdivided into poultry ranches during the 1920s.

"It's like we're the red-haired stepchild that no one wants," said Sutton, alluding to the big municipal water companies in Riverside County.

Over the years, takeover talks have failed to generate much enthusiasm from Eastern Municipal Water District or Western Municipal Water District.

Box Springs' woes -- escalating water prices and deteriorating pipes -- are typical of many of the state's 4,000 shareholder-owned water companies, said Dustin Hardwick, director of resource development with the Sacramento-based California Rural Water Association.

The company's water-supply system needs a $15 million overhaul but is trapped in a Catch 22 situation.

Box Springs would love to see new homes and businesses spring up in the 480 acres it covers. Only 50 percent is built out. But the housing boom skipped Edgemont, and the majority of the area's 585 accounts are renters.

Story continues below

Developer fees would pay for sidewalks, hydrants and water-system improvements. Studies show that if Edgemont developed its empty land, the water company could more than double the number of metered accounts to 1,200.

However, the area is frozen in a time warp with crumbling streets and weed-choked vacant lots. Developers won't come unless the water company replaces its pipes and beefs up its water pressure, according to a survey last year.

City officials say contractors refuse to replace Edgemont's deteriorating streets or install curbs, gutters and sidewalks because the vibrations of heavy equipment would break the shallow, fragile water pipes.

"We're on the back-burner end of town," quips Joe Heeter, president of the water company's board of directors.

Neither Box Springs Mutual nor Moreno Valley, which commissioned the engineering study, says they can afford to finance the upgrades.

"We'd like to see the system get fixed, but we don't have that kind of money," said Barry Foster, the city's economic development director.

Box Springs employees said they pray daily that no pipes will break.

Small-town service

Story continues below

David Bauman / The Press-Enterprise
A water utility customer walks up to the main office. On the company's 1-acre premises stands a pump station and two tanks that each hold 400,000 gallons.

The company provides water only -- 80 percent comes from wells and is blended with Western's treated water to reduce the high level of nitrates from the ground water.

"We have enough water for the next 20 years," Heeter said. "We have no worries about going under. We have a strong sense of neighborhood and community and an old way of doing things."

On the company's 1-acre premises stands a pump station and two tanks that each hold 400,000 gallons. Close by is a storage shed filled with spare parts and well-water samples, which served as headquarters until five years ago.

Most of the five employees live in or are native to Edgemont. They take turns reading meters and greet many customers by name. The average monthly bill is $44.61, Sutton said.

After 52 years with the company, Henry Johnson, operations superintendent, claims to know every inch of Box Springs Mutual's 9 miles of pipes. Last year the company spent a year and $700,000 replacing main pipes, service lines and hydrants on three major residential thoroughfares: Bertie, Phyllis and Ella avenues.

What small profit Box Springs turns -- $40,000 last year -- is plowed back into the company, Sutton said.

"It takes years to build up equity, to put into capital improvement funds," the general manager said.

There's much to improve. Some pipelines are 60 years old, rusted or clogged with sediment. Older fire hydrants that should dispense 1,500 gallons of water per minute for firefighting put out only 250 gallons per minute.

But Box Springs' employees insist they deliver something other districts don't: a personal touch.

Sutton says they give same-day service to new customers and try to make arrangements with customers who are in arrears instead of shutting off their water.

"These people are working families, the salt of the earth," Sutton said. "We really try to work with them."

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