

## The Public Ought to Know: Boro residents must not take pure water for granted

By Corey Bearak

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Corey Bearak

*Take the water, blue water  
Can you see how far it is from flowin' free  
Can we let it just be  
Without a feeling of bein' just a little guilty\**

When it comes to our drinking water, New Yorkers proudly boast safe and tasty water. The preponderance of bottled water reflects changes in habits as consumers shun or restrict sodas and other sweet beverages; it also reflects convenience and laziness as we grab a bottle or a case rather than install a filter because the pipes in our house or apartment may have lead or other impurities that affect (imagined) taste.

Queens and the rest of the city's residents take this safe water for granted except during droughts or when paying water bills. How often do you reflect on how the city manages our water supply extending across 1,972 square miles, protects it and keeps its cost down? Probably not many of us do. Perhaps we should feel "just a little guilty" for not paying attention to this resource.

With the most recent acquisition of easements and property announced this month, the city has acquired more than 50,000 acres since 1997. Sounds good.

It follows last month's announcement of \$25 million to purchase 700 acres in the Croton Watershed in Westchester, Putnam and Dutchess counties, known in water-supply speak as the "East of Hudson" watershed. About 10 percent of our drinking water comes from these sources, which cover 220,000 acres, or 345 square miles, and provide 20 percent during droughts. The other 90 percent comes from the 1.05-million-acre, or 1,640-square-mile, Catskill/Delaware watershed.

The recent progress sounds even better when you realize it doubled watershed property acquisitions that occurred over the previous several decades. I wish the driving force were sound environmental practices, but outside forces played a greater role. Absent the 1997 Watershed Memorandum of Agreement, or MOA, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Filtration Avoidance Determination, or FAD, progress may have been fleeting — despite many caring professionals at the city's Department of Environmental Protection.

You see, the MOA with counties in the Catskill and Delaware watershed known as "West of Hudson," the state of New York, the USEPA and environmental groups secured the needed State Health Department approval for the city to update watershed protection regulations not updated for more than four decades (1953).

The avoidance determination enables the city to avoid building a water filtration plant for the Catskill-Delaware watershed; such a facility could cost more than \$6 billion — maybe \$10 billion in today's dollars. Think about skyrocketing water rates if that were to become necessary.

Total city EOH holdings exceed 10,000 acres, but that represents about 5 percent of the total Croton Watershed. And plans proceed to build a costly Croton filtration plant that will also raise our water rates.

While some environmentalists still advocate filtration avoidance for EOH, some of the leading environmental organizations do not oppose the plant, which does not appear to face more obstacles in the face of a federal Safe Water Drinking Act mandate to build it. The city does a bit better, more than doubling its ownership of the WHO watershed to 7.9 percent, up from 3.7 percent in 1997.

And the DEP provides data on its efforts to date on the [www.nyc.gov](http://www.nyc.gov) Web site, including annual reports required by the New York State Sanitary Code, the National Primary Drinking Water Regulations and the MOA.

Before the MOA got done, I worked on legislation to require the city to develop an annual plan to ensure safe and adequate drinking water and maintain clean waterways. Then Queens Councilman Sheldon Leffler introduced and reintroduced legislation in several council sessions. City administrations complained the requirements of the state and federal government were enough and a local legal mandate was unnecessary.

Unfortunately, revised legislation did not get done in the 1998-2001 council session. While one can debate its merits, the threat of a specific plan legislated by law moves administrations and agencies to act in the public interest on a quicker timetable.

In the summer of 2001, Resa Dimino, an environmental planner where I then worked, collaborated with me to update the bill focusing only on watershed protection and water supply.

The proposed NYC Clean Water Law announced that August codified practices the current DEP leadership appears to follow, including a comprehensive watershed and delivery system management plan covering the Catskill, Delaware, Croton and Brooklyn/Queens aquifer watersheds; an annual watershed survey and review of rules and regulations and agreements on watershed protection; reform of personnel to protect the watershed and water supply; and a water conservation plan.

Importantly, it engages our borough presidents and city council members by requiring the DEP to report on water supply and conservation and staffing, as

well as for our elected officials to comment on such plans. This council session, maybe someone might like to introduce this bill?

*C'mon and get your water, blue water  
Can we settle for what you can give\**

\*From "Blue Water," by Paul Cotton, 1973 Poco Publishing ASCAP.

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