

Utility customers left to tread water

KY. AMERICAN IMPENETRABLE UNDER RWE

By Bill Varallis

It frustrates me to be told that there is no one in Lexington I can talk to about a problem with my water bill.

RWE, the mega-corporation that controls our water system, continues to say that nothing has changed with my water service.

As a businessman who used to be able to talk to someone here in Lexington whenever I had a question, I can tell you that just about everything about Kentucky American Water has changed, and it does make a difference.

It makes a difference when you call for help, and they are in another state. It makes a difference that they are responsible to the corporation and not to the community. It makes a difference when the people in charge are in West Virginia or Pennsylvania or England or Germany.

It makes a difference when the profit from the money we pay for water goes into the pockets of shareholders. And it makes a difference to me that some of those shareholders are other municipal governments. They can use my money to pay their police and fire department employees, but my community can't.

I fear that my experience is typical of the kinds of problems customers are having getting through to RWE about local concerns.

At the top of my list of frustrations is being told that there is no one in Lexington I can talk to. Believe me, when I got a water bill in April for \$40,768.51, I wanted to talk to someone fast.

The water bill for my business usually runs about \$53 a month. I couldn't imagine that I actually owed \$40,768.51, but computers don't really care how much you owe and are pretty unforgiving when you don't pay your bill on time, regardless of the amount.

I started calling the customer service number printed on my bill immediately after I opened it. The more times I dialed, the more frustrated I became. Starting at 10:30 a.m., it took 45 minutes of continuous dialing before a real person answered.

When I finally got through, I was told that the earliest someone could come out would be on Thursday, four days later. I imagined another \$5,000 being added to my bill before anyone talked to me about the problem. I remember thinking that it was a good thing my water bill wasn't paid by automatic withdrawal.

What I really wanted to do that day, however, was talk to someone in Lexington. I used to be able to do that when the people who ran the water company actually lived here. No can do, said the operator.

I insisted, stressing that I really wanted to talk to someone immediately and someone in Lexington. Sorry, said the operator, who I now know was in Alton, Ill.

Still eager to actually talk to someone in Lexington, I suggested that maybe I could talk to Roy Mundy, who often sends me letters enclosed with my bill about RWE's good service.

Again I was told that I couldn't talk to anyone in Lexington. It was clear that I wasn't going to be able to talk to anyone except the operator, who was happy to take my information and send someone out at RWE's convenience.

Of course, no one came on Thursday, so back to the phone I went. This time I was told that someone had been to my place of business on Tuesday. That was news to me, and, if true, they made no effort to talk to anyone.

Again, I asked if there was someone I could talk to in Lexington. Again, I was told that there wasn't.

Finally, 10 days after my first call to Alton, someone from the water company showed up to tell me that I didn't have a leak -- which I already knew -- and that the bill had been adjusted, which I also already knew.

There are good people in our community working for the water company who I'm sure want to do a good job. But apparently they couldn't do anything until someone somewhere, clearly not in Lexington, told them to check out my problem.

But it shouldn't have taken so many telephone calls and so much of my time to have someone come to my place of business 10 days after my first call and tell me no one in Lexington knows what's going on, which is exactly what happened.

The good news is that the bill was adjusted, and I actually owed \$3.50. I even received a letter from someone telling me that my meter had been misread, but I don't know who sent it because it wasn't signed. As far as I know, it wasn't from Mundy.

The bad news is that the letter says that if I have any problems, I can call customer service anytime.