

Is Tap Water Better Than Bottled Water?

by Commissioner Bruce Gardiner



Are you drinking bottled water? Do you know what you are drinking? Is tap water better for you?

There is much talk in the media today about bottled water and why you may not want to drink it. Some drink bottle water because they think it's better for them others drink it because it is more convenient.

Americans drink a huge amount of bottled water – almost 7.2 billion gallons in 2005, for which they paid over \$8.8 billion dollars. Small wonder, that if the major soft drink companies can't get you to drink their soda, they are delighted to sell you their bottled water. Pepsi's Aquafina brand sold more than \$425.4 million worth in 2005; Coke's Dasani brand \$346.1 million and Nestlé's Poland Springs brand \$199.7 million. On average we are spending 2,000 times the amount on bottled water that we spend on tap water.

But is bottled water purer than Northshore's tap water? Did you know that as much as 40% of all bottled water is tap water? The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulates bottled water as food. In contrast, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) monitors tap water under the Safe Drinking Water Act with much stricter regulations.

The FDA's record of protecting consumers is unfortunately well known with myriad of recalls of food products after they have reached the supermarket shelves or your cupboard. The FDA has less than one full-time employee devoted to bottled water oversight. The FDA rules only apply to bottled water packaged and sold across state lines, which leaves out 60-70% of the water bottled and sold within a single state. The FDA requirement is to test four empty bottles once every three months for bacterial contamination. The bottling

company must test a sample of water after filtration and before bottling for bacteria once a week. For chemical, physical and radiological contamination, a sample of water must be checked only once a year. After the water is bottled or stored, no more tests are required. Nearly 40 states have bottled water laws and regulations, some mirror the FDA, while others are more stringent, and some less so.



The FDA says, "Bottled water plants generally are assigned a relative low priority for inspection". In fiscal year 2008, for instance, only a total of 468 inspections of bottled water facilities were completed. In the first nine months of 2009, only 253.

The District's tap water – your water – on the other hand is closely monitored and regulated. The water source originates in the pristine foothills of the Cascade Mountains where it is treated by Seattle Public Utilities. The District's water sampling program consists of drawing 63 samples a month from eight different locations throughout the District. The District is also currently installing additional sample stations in preparation for the new drinking water regulations that will be in place in 2012.

Finally, this article does not even begin to address the environmental impacts related to bottled water, such as the bottles that the water comes in, the oil and energy used to produce the bottles and the fact that 80% of recycled bottles end up in the landfills, in our seas, or shipped off to other counties. Not to mention that disposal of water bottles in this manner causes leaching of the manufacturing chemicals into our oceans and water tables.

But by drinking tap water, which you have already paid for, you are drinking something that's good for you, good for the environment and good for your wallet.



The Commissioners and Staff of Northshore Utility District Wish You and Your Family a Safe, Healthy and Happy Holiday Season!



Utility Rate Notification

During this time of year, one of the most frequent calls we receive is on *“how much will my water and/or sewer bill be going up next year?”* In these difficult economic times, this is certainly a question on most ratepayers’ minds.

In June of this year, the King County Council voted to raise the wholesale sewer treatment cost for single-family residences approximately 13.2%, or from \$31.90 monthly to \$36.10 monthly. This increase will be for a two-year period beginning January 1, 2011.

At Northshore Utility District, the Board of Commissioners establishes utility charges on an annual basis. This decision is made after District staff proposes, and the Board approves, an operating and capital expenditure budget for the upcoming year. The District has two public rate hearings in February of each year before any rate changes occur. After the hearings and Board approval, new utility rates will be in effect for all billings sent on or after March 15, 2011.

With this being said, sewer rates for 2011 are certain to increase. The only remaining question is by how much? The District aims to establish fair and reasonable rates that cover the costs of operations, system replacement and improvement needs. You will be notified by mail of the increase before rates take effect.

District Management is certainly aware of

the poor economic conditions and the District operates in a very conservative manner. As examples of this, the District has left several vacant positions unfilled, deferred the purchase of equipment when practical, and is constantly evaluating our vendor relationships in search of the best value for District ratepayers. However, one area where we have accelerated spending is in capital improvement construction. The reason for this is that bids for current construction contracts have been up to 40% less than the engineer’s estimates. We believe that by accelerating construction projects during these lean times, we provide better long-term value to our ratepayers. In addition, all improvements made in the past five years have been financed with District reserves. That is to say, the District has not incurred any new debt since 2005, and our debt levels compared to total District assets are among the lowest of any public utility in the area.

We understand that there is never a good time to raise utility rates. However, the District has no control over King County’s decision to raise the sewerage treatment service rates, but as ratepayers – you do. Contact information for the County is as follows:

KC Executive email address: kcexec@kingcounty.gov
KC Executive number: 206-296-4040
KC Wastewater Treatment Div.: 206-296-0100
KC Council direct number: 206-296-1000

Did You Know?

- ◆ That the District now accepts the American Express Card as a payment option for your utility bill.
- ◆ That each winter our crews insulate your water meter to keep it from freezing? So don’t be alarmed if you see your meter full of dirt, sawdust or wood chips as this is just one part of our winter preparedness program.
- ◆ That a dripping faucet or fixture can waste

3-gallons of water a day for a total of 1,095 gallons a year.

- ◆ A dairy cow must drink 4 gallons of water to produce 1 gallon of milk.



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Commissioners:

Bruce Gardiner
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Commissioner

Board of
Commissioner
Meetings
are held at the
District Office
on the
first and third
Monday of each
month at 5:30 p.m.
except Holidays.



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