

McKownville: On The Front Line

Wednesday, Aug. 27 will be the date of the referendum on the merger of the McKownville and Westmere Water Districts. Voting for residents in the present McKownville district will take place from 4 to 10 p.m. at the McKownville Fire House. Westmere district residents will vote during the same hours at the Westmere Fire House.

One of the factors raised in connection with the water district merger is the McKownville Reservoir. How will merger affect it?

I looked into the Reservoir's past, present and future, and what I came up with forms the rest of this column. If any of the facts which follow are in error, please let me know.

THE PAST

The reservoir was used for water by McKownville residents since before 1949, when the McKownville Water District was formed. Up until 1970, the reservoir provided the sole source of water to the district. In 1970 the district (which is indirectly administered by the Town Board) began to supplement the reservoir water with water purchased from the Westmere Water District.

In November 1973 McKownville ceased using reservoir water and began relying totally on Westmere water, as it does today. The switch from the reservoir to Westmere came about in part because of dissatisfaction by McKownville residents with the finished reservoir water. Raw McKownville Reservoir water contains rather high levels of iron, and the town had had a rather poor record of success in removing the iron.

As a result, the water, while safe, frequently had an undesirable taste, and tended to leave permanent brown stains on laundry. The

purified water also contained considerable sediment.

Whether the poor McKownville water quality was caused by badly designed filtering equipment or by inexpert operation of the filtering plant is not known.

Prior to 1974, the reservoir was capable of providing, in dry periods, enough water to supply some 2,500 persons. Its capacity was dependent on Harrington's Pond, situated behind the parking lot of the McKownville United Methodist Church on the southeastern portion of the proposed Crossgates site.

In the 1960s the church owned Harrington's Pond, but sold it in March 1972 to the Questor Corp., a developer. On Nov. 19, 1974, the dam holding back Harrington's Pond breached, transforming the pond into a marshy stream.

The loss of Harrington's Pond reduced the capacity of the reservoir from 250,000 to 100,000 gallons per day. The water district received an insurance payment of \$10,000 for the resulting siltation of the reservoir, but nothing was done

to repair the dam. It remains in its damaged state to this day.

The present owners of Harrington's Pond evidently did not wish the pond restored to its former condition, and the town could or would not require restoration of the dam.

It is easy to guess why.

In 1971, the area containing Harrington's Pond (that is, the present proposed Crossgates site) was zoned COR, and in 1973 the Town Board redefined the COR zoning designation to allow a shopping center on the site. By 1975 plans for a shopping center and convention complex on the Crossgates site were far enough along to be mentioned in the revision of the town's zoning master plan. Of course, Harrington's Pond would be incompatible with such a development.

So, it appears, is the reservoir itself.

The reservoir, I am told, has been subject to commercial pressure ever since the development of Stuyvesant Plaza. The Plaza obtained 25 acres of reservoir land in 1958, 2.1 acres in 1968 and tried to obtain .6 acres in 1972. The latter sale, for \$2,500, was withdrawn when the McKownville Improvement Association determined that the parcel was worth five times the proposed sale price and threatened a lawsuit.

In 1969 Niagara Mohawk obtained .42 acres. In 1973 the sewer district obtained a right of way for a sewer line to Stuyvesant Plaza, which crossed the Krum Kill upstream from the reservoir. The reservoir has also had to absorb storm drain runoff and runoff from melting snow from Stuyvesant Plaza.

The most recent pressure on the reservoir has come from Crossgates. In 1977 Questor's interest in the proposed Crossgates site was taken over by Pyramid. By the summer of 1978 Pyramid had formulated plans for the Crossgates Mall, had achieved a change of zoning on the site from COR to B-2, and had realized that its parking lot runoff would flow into the reservoir.

The Oct. 18, 1978 letter quoted in my July 25 column expressed Crossgates' concern. Crossgates proposed to Supervisor Walters to transform the reservoir into a park at a cost of over \$250,000, provided that the reservoir be declassified to permit parking lot runoff to flow into the reservoir without treatment. Nothing came of that proposal.

THE PRESENT

What is the status of the McKownville Reservoir today?

The reservoir is currently the only legal source of water for the McKownville Water District. It remains so only because the Town Board, as administrators of the McKownville and Westmere Water District, neglected until this spring to take steps to legalize the sale of water from Westmere to McKown-

ville. That application was made in recent months to EnCon and is pending.

The reservoir is coveted by developers as a prime piece of commercial real estate.

It is viewed as an obstacle to the commercial development of the proposed Crossgates site upstream. In its present status, the reservoir is a Class A body of water, suitable as a source of drinking water or any other use. A commercial development upstream cannot discharge runoff into the reservoir without obtaining a SPDES permit from the state, a permit which mandates regular monitoring of water quality and expensive treatment of runoff if, as is likely with Crossgates, that runoff fails to meet Class A water quality standards.

As a source of public water, the reservoir's capacity is much reduced by the loss of Harrington's Pond, and in any case could serve only a small fraction of the population now being served by the Watervliet Reservoir.

The reservoir and the land around it is the only town-owned green space in McKownville with any recreational potential.

THE FUTURE

What about the future of the reservoir?

In the short term, the status of the reservoir is bound to change. Either the merger of the McKownville and Westmere Water Districts, or the granting of the town's petition to EnCon to legalize the sale of water by Westmere to McKownville, will end the status of the reservoir as the only legal source of water for McKownville. The only alternative to one of these actions is to resume using the reservoir for water, and the town's neglect of the reservoir, equipment and watershed over the past decade makes that alternative difficult.

Once the reservoir loses its status as the sole legal source of water for McKownville, the way is open for anyone including Crossgates to petition EnCon for a

change of classification. Crossgates expressed a desire to have it reclassified to Class D, which would permit it to be polluted to the point where fish could not propagate and swimming would be unsafe.

On the surface, merger shouldn't seem to affect the status of the reservoir.

But defenders of the reservoir feel the merger will affect its future.

The reservoir remains an asset of the McKownville Water District. By itself, the McKownville district is small enough that at some future time, the reservoir might economically be brought back into use. The reservoir and groundwater beneath it could together provide much of the district's needs.

Virtually all parties in McKownville appear to favor retention of the reservoir and its watershed as a potential long-range water resource.

With merger, McKownville residents would have no more standing in a reservoir decision process than residents of any other part of the Westmere District. Residents who live elsewhere in Guilderland would have an equal voice with McKownville residents in the fate of the reservoir. Such residents may not be sympathetic to McKownville's problems: congestion, need for recreation space, excessive commercialization, and sensitivity to Crossgates. McKownville residents would find their voices in decisions affecting the reservoir diluted by voices with much less of a stake in the outcome.