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Huge Potomac water main shut down after alarm sounds

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About 1.8 million people in Montgomery and Prince George's counties have been ordered to stop watering their lawns and washing their cars and limit their use of toilets, dishwashers and washing machines through the Fourth of July weekend after officials shut down a huge water main in Potomac on Thursday.

The Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission issued the temporary order after technicians sensed that there could be weaknesses in the concrete pipe -- at eight feet wide, the largest in the system -- near Tuckerman Lane and Gainsborough Road in Montgomery. Round-the-clock work is being done on the pipe.

The utility hopes that the limits will reduce water use by about one-third, officials said. They want to ensure that fire departments in the two counties have adequate water pressure to fight fires. Residents can continue to drink tap water. Car washes that use recycled water are not affected, and the restrictions do not affect people on wells or municipal water systems. If the restrictions fail and water pressure drops, it is possible that bacteria could seep into the water, but that is not an issue now, officials said.

Mark Brady, spokesman for the Prince George's fire and EMS department, said that there is enough water to battle typical house fires but that the weakened main could create difficulties for larger blazes.

"The pressure is not a problem. It's the amount of water pumped into the system," Brady said. WSSC officials have said they can reroute additional water to areas if necessary, he added.

This is not the first time a massive main has caused major problems for the WSSC. In late 2008, a concrete main 66 inches in diameter burst along River Road in Bethesda, stranding cars amid a torrent of frigid water and requiring motorists to be rescued by helicopter and firefighters in boats. Other large water-main breaks in the past several years have led to boil-water advisories for homes, businesses and hospitals as well as the temporary closure of schools and day-care centers.

Although the WSSC implemented an 8 1/2 percent rate increase to pay for system improvements -- a fee plan that took effect Thursday -- officials concede that the pace of repairing and modernizing its infrastructure has been slow. Previously proposed rate increases have been rolled back by politicians in favor of other priorities, and the six-member operating board has often engaged in political infighting.

In 2008, about 1,700 pipes leaked or broke. A 90-year record was set in 2007 with 2,129.

"Are we doing enough? Probably not," said Montgomery County Council President Nancy Floreen (D-At Large). "We've been wrestling with Prince George's for years over the right rate to apply to fund major infrastructure replacement. As a result, we're still in a piecemeal, crisis-response mode."

'Ping' signaled a problem

The Potomac water main was installed in 1969 and was last inspected three years ago, WSSC spokesman Jim Neustadt said. After that inspection, crews left behind fiber-optic equipment to detect the "ping" sounds created when the reinforcing steel wires snap from corrosion after groundwater seeps through the pipe's decaying concrete walls. A flurry of pings -- one on Tuesday afternoon and seven more just after midnight -- triggered an alarm warning that the pipe was in danger of bursting, Neustadt said.

Crews began digging along the shoulder of Tuckerman Lane on Thursday afternoon, and their work could require lane closures. The pipe is about six miles long and links the water filtration plant in Potomac with another pipe east of Interstate 270. Workers must drain a section about three-quarters of a mile long, then cut out the weakened section and replace it.

James P. Keary, a Prince George's spokesman, said the government is sending notices out through its e-mail discussion lists, Twitter accounts and other social media to alert residents to the restrictions. Although the fine for violating the water restrictions is \$500, officials in both jurisdictions said they will encourage violators to comply with the policy.

"Most people will understand this," Keary said. "There will be some who forgot to reset their sprinklers, and somebody will go out and wash their cars. But I don't think we have to be the water police on this."

'Not where it should be'

The WSSC's attention to fixing its aging pipes has been diverted for decades by tensions between its six politically appointed commissioners -- three from Montgomery, three from Prince George's -- who oversee policy and approve large contracts. The acrimony came to a head last year when the board became deadlocked along county lines over a new general manager, and a Prince George's commissioner accused two Montgomery commissioners of racial bias. The board was so bogged down in debating minority contracting issues that it didn't discuss the massive River Road pipe break for two months.

For years, the WSSC board has generally sought double-digit rate increases, said Keith Levchenko, a senior legislative analyst with the Montgomery council. Montgomery's council had pushed for a 9.9 percent increase for the fiscal year that began Thursday, and Prince George's called for an 8 percent increase. They compromised at 8 1/2 percent.

A household that uses 210 gallons a day pays \$761 per year in water and sewer charges, according to the WSSC.

"We wanted to go higher, they wanted to go lower and everyone has a fair point," Floreen said. "But at the end of the day, our infrastructure is not where it should be for this very fundamental government function."

Said Thomas E. Dernoga (D-Laurel), chairman of the Prince George's County Council: "I think that an 8 1/2 percent rate hike is very steep in this economy.

"With increasing utility costs, high unemployment and the recession in general, many residents cannot afford more expenditure increases. The past few years, WSSC rates have increased much faster than the rate of inflation," he added.

Maintenance work prompted by the 2008 River Road incident is complicating the current predicament, officials said. The 66-inch main that burst then is out of service for a previously scheduled inspection and repairs, Levchenko said, so it can't be used to help manage water supplies in the next several, crucial days.

Staff writer Michael Laris contributed to this report.

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