

## Memorandum

TO: MWRA Board

FROM: Mason Phelps

DATE: 6-28-06

RE: Selling "Excess" Water

The arguments given for selling "excess" water in order to lower water bills in the user basins are completely insensitive to the feelings and needs of the people in the donor basins and to the protection of their environment. In fact both of these are completely ignored. Many of the people who originally owned the land under the Quabbin (and their relatives) still hate the government for taking their land. Others have managed to convince themselves that they did a good thing when they sacrificed their homes so that the people in the user communities would have water to drink. How do you suppose they will feel when water which could have been used help restore the donor basin's environment will instead be sent to Boston so the users can pay less to water their lawns?

Why are water rates so much higher now than in the past? At least part of the reason is that long-deferred maintenance and needed improvements are finally being undertaken all at once. Thus the artificially low rates of the past are being subsidized by the high rates of the present. The chickens have come home to roost. This is just a small indication of what is going on all over the world. For example we are now just beginning to pay for our past high standard of living which has resulted in Global Warming and all its consequences.

I would now like to point out that at least four of the assumptions made in the process of trying to justify selling "excess" water are open to question.

First - This water is excess only if one believes that its sole use is to provide water for the users of the MWRA system. It is not excess in terms of the proper functioning of the ecosystem of the donor basin, since, for example, the water which now flows down the Swift River into the Chicopee and thence into the Connecticut is just a very small fraction of the water that flowed there before the Swift was dammed. Thus the Swift River and other donor or distressed rivers should have first dibs on this "excess" water. However, once water is transferred to distressed user basins to augment river flows, these basins should be required to cease the withdrawals which led to the distress.

Second - The assumption that the population of the user communities will not grow significantly is overly optimistic. This prediction is based on the assumption that current population trends will never change. However changes in such trends are essentially unpredictable because they depend heavily on fads and individual whims and desires and not on logic. Since infill and building upward are distinct possibilities and since these are encouraged by Smart Growth, the future population is almost unlimited.

Third - The assumption that we can know the safe yield of reservoirs is not a wise one. Safe yield depends on extrapolating past weather behavior to predict future weather, estimating future populations and daily per capita usage. Global warming is changing weather patterns so drastically and unpredictably, that future weather is only a guess. As we have seen in the discussion of the Second assumption above, population is also unpredictable. Unless we believe that we can reduce daily usage to zero (in which case the whole argument is moot), it seems dangerous to count on any estimate of safe yield

if we don't have to, except to reassure the users that the system has sufficient drought protection. Counting on a present estimate of safe yield in order to justify selling water is another matter and seems unnecessarily risky.

Fourth - The presentations on selling "excess" water have occasionally let slip that the proponents are only looking ahead about ten or twenty years. This is very short-sighted indeed, since the reservoirs will presumably be needed forever. Perhaps this short prediction span accounts for the confidence they express in their estimates of future population and safe yield. They should be thinking ahead centuries or millenia rather than just decades.

From the MWRA viewpoint excess water is water that the MWRA can control in any way that it wants, the current proposal for example. However this water also represents a protective buffer which would permit the system to get through droughts with much less stress. This suggests that in order to provide the most reliable service to the users, the MWRA should seek to increase the amount of excess water rather than seeking to minimize it. This would have two benefits. It would provide a larger protective buffer for the users and it would provide more water for the distressed basins at least during times of plentiful water. In case the optimistic projections should prove incorrect some of the water going to the donor and distressed basins could be redirected to the users to help during droughts.

This buffer would also be available to provide for normal system expansion. However until such time as the addition of each new user requires no new water and water use becomes truly sustainable, each new user will cause the "excess" water to decrease and the protective buffer will gradually disappear. It does not make sense to

decrease this protective buffer for such a trivial reason as selling it to increase dollar income. It will disappear soon enough on its own.

Why are the people of the donor basins and the distressed basins so concerned about this proposal? The answer is very simple. We are concerned about protecting our environment. WSCAC was formed, and water conservation was promoted, in order to prevent the diversion of water to the Quabbin from the Connecticut River and perhaps even from the Millers River. Fortunately conservation was successful, so successful in fact that we were beginning to feel that our environment was safe, at least for awhile, from Boston's ever increasing need for water, and it provided hope that water would be available to restore the environment of the donor and distressed basins.

However, this proposal puts these environments back at risk. We know from past experience that the environment always loses when it conflicts with human desires. However, the quote from Pam Heidell recorded in the minutes of a recent MWRA Board meeting justifying this proposal, "— economic benefits from bringing new communities into the MWRA system, far outweigh the minimal environmental costs —", brings this to a whole new level. Translated into its baldest terms, this means that the users will receive the economic benefits while the donors will pay the unknown environmental costs. This would set an unfortunate environmental precedent.

Using the so-called excess water as suggested in the discussion above represents, to borrow a phrase, a truly win-win-win solution, since it provides long term security for the users and long term environmental improvement for both the donor and the distressed basins.