

Officials look toward future water needs

by Sandy Foster

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PICKENS COUNTY - With the ever-looming possibility of Atlanta taking water from the Savannah River Basin and the high costs to operate and maintain plants and water lines, Lynn Breazeale, chairman of the Pickens County Water Authority, said "a good case could be made for a more efficient system."

With 12 different water districts serving the county, he said there is a lot of overlap in service.

"It's time to look at combining some things to create some economy of scale – more bang for the buck," Breazeale said.

But he emphasized that he is not talking about creating one water district for the county.

"What I envision is the eastern part of the county being served out of the Saluda River Basin and the western part of the county being served out of the Savannah River Basin," Breazeale said.

"That's generally the way the county is divided up when the rainwater falls and the creeks are draining," he said.

Breazeale said all the districts are doing a good job, but from an economic standpoint, some joint efforts would be beneficial to customers.

He believes that combining personnel, equipment and billing efforts could lower water bills, or perhaps free up funds to improve aging pipes.

Currently, Easley Combined Utilities provides water to most of the water districts in the eastern part of the county, so the Water Authority's focus is primarily on the West, Breazeale said.

Tim Gilstrap of the Six Mile Water District agrees that joint efforts between the western water districts could be beneficial to them all.

"I feel like overall that if the water districts in the western side of Pickens County could work together in whatever format - and I don't know what that would be - it would be the best for each district long term," he said.

Gilstrap said many rural water districts in

the South, including Six Mile, were created after the federal government offered a financial avenue to bring safe drinking water to the countryside.

The districts developed over many years out of necessity – but in a patchwork manner.

"The houses in these communities were served by wells 40 and 50 years ago," Breazeale said. "People would have wells go dry, and the conditions were hard."

So those spearheading efforts to pipe water to their communities would go door to door and ask people to sign a petition if they were interested in buying a water

tap, he said.

Then they got the funds to lay the pipes through the old Farmer's Home Administration.

Since then, each water district has grown and evolved with separate identities, operating as an integral part of each community.

"There's a lot of community pride been built into these districts," Breazeale said.

Both he and Gilstrap agree that it will take a lot of "cooperation, vision and foresight" to make a joint venture a reality.

But dialogue between the districts is taking place, said Katherine Brackett, Pickens City administrator.

"The good thing is that we're all talking, and it wasn't always this way," she said. "The importance of water and the cases going on bring it all to light. We need to all be working together and being on the same page."

Much of those talks, according to Breazeale, have centered around the possibility of a joint effort to build a large treatment plant on Lake Keowee that could service the City of Pickens, the Six Mile Water District, Bethlehem-Koanoke, the City of Liberty, Southside Water District and a portion of the Easley-Central Water District.