

Persistence Makes Things Happen

I began working with Public Wholesale Water Supply District No. 4 in extreme southeastern Kansas at the time of its construction in 1984.

It was a great experience. That new system became the wholesale supply for five cities and eight rural water districts. The board and staff and the members had one mission – and that was to provide quality water to as many communities that wanted and needed a supply. I retired as manager of Public Wholesale District No. 4 late last year after 27 years of work there. Developing that system required dedication – and persistence.

It has been my pleasure to have served as president of the KRWA board of directors of the past year; I am honored for the other directors' confidence in being elected to serve as Board President for 2012 also.

With my experience as a utility manager and as a KRWA director, I know that persistence is a word that also describes the approach by your Kansas Rural Water Association.

Like many local water systems, I've watched the KRWA staff plug away to help KRWA fulfill its mission which is *“To provide leadership, education, and technical assistance to public water and wastewater utilities to enhance the public health and to sustain Kansas' communities.”* Yes, it's done with persistence! And persistence is an important aspect of making things happen.



PERSISTENCE

Small, steady steps

Those who attended the recent annual meeting of KRWA membership heard that the KRWA has sustained some funding reductions in recent time. Those were primarily U.S. EPA funding for a training and technical assistance program and source water protection program administered through National Rural Water Association. The training program was very critical over the years. It provided the main source of funding that allowed KRWA to offer hundreds of training sessions which were provided at no charge to those attending. Systems benefited from that.

In May, the KRWA board of directors' meet for their quarterly meeting; the meeting was held in Melvern. Just as at all other KRWA meetings, the board reviewed the various program budgets and financial condition of the Association. And that condition is sound. But, success is not measured on a balance sheet; success is when the mission of an organization is fulfilled to the best extent possible. I have always been impressed that KRWA conducts surveys and asks what additional training opportunities or other assistance might be provided to help local communities. It is exactly that sort of inquiry that has led to the establishment of various programs that KRWA continues to efficiently operate. KRWA has working relationships and contracts provided through the National Rural Water Association – of which the funding originates with USDA Rural Development, and technical assistance programs administered through the Kansas Water Office and Kansas Department of Health and Environment (KDHE), Indian Health Service, and the Kansas Department of Commerce in support of the KAN STEP program. In addition, several programs are funded internally, namely GPS Mapping. I am impressed that at every one the Association board meetings, a report is provided on each program – down to the miles driven by each staff member and the hours logged. There is no detail that is not available to the board – and that's how it should be.

Operator, board/council challenges

A significantly high percentage of those persons in Kansas who are operators of water and wastewater systems continues to change every year. The “human capital” that is available in many small rural communities continues to decline. Some of those communities will soon have no option but to contract for services with neighboring systems. KRWA has provided many examples of systems that are contracting services to other systems. Such arrangements have been featured in this publication and also at numerous training sessions and annual conferences.

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For the past six years, KRWA has been contracted by the Kansas Department of Health and Environment to provide emergency on-site assistance and operator training to new operators. Funding for the program ended on June 30, 2012. KRWA's board voted to continue to pursue funding assistance through KDHE that will help KRWA provide assistance to systems with new operators or in some cases, when there is no operator available. Personally, I don't know of any better way that KRWA could be of more help to those more in need.

KRWA also is going to continue to advocate for and promote board/council training. The KanCap training program was developed by KRWA with input for other organizations and agencies. Thanks to funding through a set-aside of the State Revolving Loan Program, KDHE helped the project become a reality. KRWA is presently working to update the program, some of which is due to the ongoing changes in software security. Boards and councils need training. Those who don't believe so are encouraged to attend anyway and share their success stories.

Defining “persistence”

To me, the word “persistence” means to never give up, to never throw in the towel if you truly believe in what you are doing and if you truly believe in your gut that by making decisions and looking forward, that things will improve. Reacting to changing conditions and demands, and accepting feedback is extremely important. KRWA hasn't given up because KRWA does what it can to be of help to anyone who asks. Local systems however also have to help in some cases by trying to cooperate more with neighbors. Don't just be a spectator with no skin in the game.

My suggestion is to never give in to the obstacles in your path. And there will be many obstacles, some of which will seem insurmountable and which may even come from the people who are around you – sometimes even your closest allies and trusted advisors. Never ever give up. Persist, continue, little by little, to do what is right. That brings back to mind the 2012 KRWA conference theme; that's a “Recipe for Success!”

Sam Atherton has been a member of the board of directors of the Kansas Rural Water Association since March 2006. He received a bachelor's degree from Fort Hays State University; he is also the past-president of the National FFA Alumni. He retired in late 2011 as manager of Public Wholesale Water Supply District No. 4.

