

# A Successful Water System Requires Good Planning and Management

**M**uch has been said and volumes of information written about proper management and management skills. It's true – nearly everything boils down to management and planning. I don't know of any success story anywhere in life that just happened when there was no plan or a well conceived idea.

So it is with the public water supply systems. Careful planning is critical to ensure the viability of every water system – large or small. There are many forms of training offered through various providers to assist system owners and operators in the planning for the sustainability of public water supply systems. KRWA is emphasizing the KanCap board/council training program; it's a valuable experience to help board and council members, managers, operators and clerical staff to improve management of their public water supply systems.

In my work providing assistance to cities and RWDs, I see systems that are thriving and many that are serving communities that are slowly dying. That is sad. Many times those that are dying are due to financial circumstances that may be out of their control; some are simply losing customer base. But many times, failures in water system occur because of poor management, neglect or possibly lack

of good advice and assistance. There are many factors other than the condition of a water system that affects the viability of a community.

Water systems in Kansas generally do a good job of serving their customers. I know that KRWA makes a difference in helping virtually all systems in the state every year in one way or another. KRWA's training program, which is nearly always provided without cost to the systems, along with the on site assistance that is available through KRWA, is unique. Funding through state and federal contracts makes that assistance possible. That assistance ranges from lining up inventory for an emergency repair or switching out a substitute chlorinator, doing a water

rate analysis to plan for a badly needed upgrade, or helping in numerous disasters. Those efforts keep the systems on track today and tomorrow, but the longer term results for a system boil down to the level of management and planning by that city or RWDs governing body and staff.

I often think about the contrasts between systems and the approaches they take. For example, a small, 500-member system constructed a new water tower, a well and more than a mile of transmission line. The community paid the nearly \$1 million for it from their cash reserves. They sought no loans and asked for no grants. How was that possible? Well, that community had planned in advance and had budgeted and adjusted rates to help them accomplish their goals. Another system with 200 customers needed a new water source due to a source water quality issue; the water system had deteriorated from an infrastructure standpoint. That community did not even have enough cash on hand to pay for a preliminary engineering report, much less any actual project. I will never forget the mayor asking me for advice on where to begin. KRWA provided assistance; that community is presently back in compliance with a new water source, has added some customers and has made necessary rate adjustments to fund the water utility adequately. Another system decided to purchase their own trencher and backhoe to install line extensions instead of contracting for that work. Today that system has reasonably well paid employees, a remarkable, huge shop, and a new office.

The greatest challenge for many systems is that they cannot afford a full-time operator. The part-time operator

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Jarred Wilson, Mike Brothers and Kenny Wiens from Rice RWD 1 were among 31 people who attended a KanCap training session in Lyons in November.jpg

usually has another job – or even two other jobs, and other obligations. A solution to this may be for neighboring systems to jointly fund an operator. Larger projects such as valve or hydrant replacements can be completed on weekends. I have assisted many small systems while the operator was off from normal working hours.

Identifying and understanding what needs to be done and how to go about it is a challenge for many boards and council members. Sometimes it boils down to admitting the water system has problems. Often new board or council members have little if any experience with water or wastewater or other municipal utilities. They also have busy lives. I encourage boards and councils to attend future KanCap training sessions. It's a small investment of one-day's time that will provide years of management skills. Perhaps public service should be viewed like National Guard duty with employers providing time off?

In summary, management and planning are key to a water system's viability. That requires board and council members to learn as much as possible to help them make the right decisions on issues from employee hiring to rate setting.

*Jon Steele has been employed by KRWA as a Circuit Rider since 1995. Jon is certified as a water and wastewater operator. He has more than 25 years experience in public works, construction and industrial arts.*



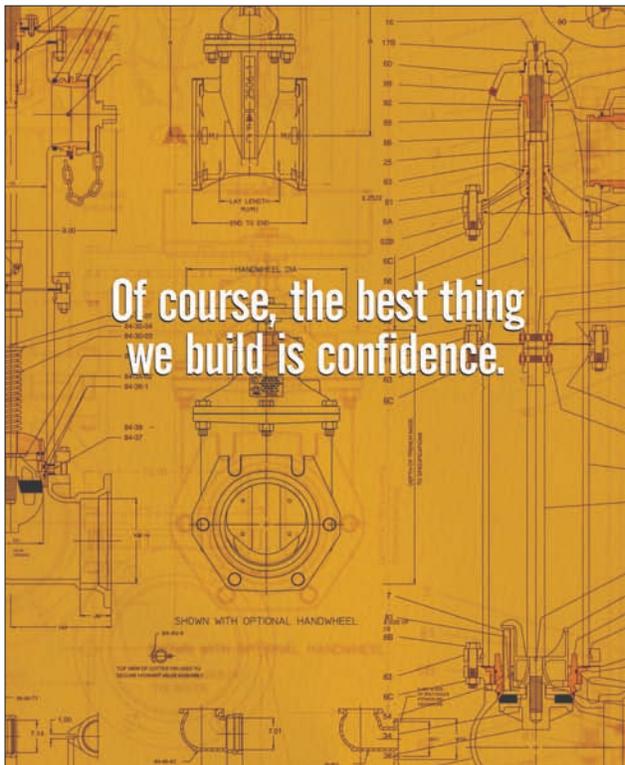
## Special sessions for board/council members



The 2010 KRWA conference March 30 to April 1 in Wichita has numerous training sessions that are aimed at helping boards and councils. These include the full day KanCap training, Resolving Disputes, and Evaluating Funding Options sessions on Tuesday, March 30. Additional breakout sessions on Wednesday and Thursday include these:

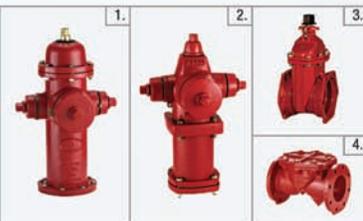
- **Avoid Mistakes With Kansas Open Meetings**
- **Improve Your Communication Skills**
- **Love Thy Neighbor But Have An Agreement**
- **Equipping Board And Council Members To Be Effective Leaders**
- **Conserving Energy – Case Studies And Funding**
- **What Do You Do When You Are The News?**
- **Water And Wastewater Management**

*There are many others in addition to these.  
The conference is a good investment.  
Plan now to attend.*



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