

How Assistance And Objective Thinking Helped Our RWD Evolve



Douglas RWD 1 recently contracted for services with the neighboring Douglas RWD 5. Above, Larry Wray of Douglas RWD 5, takes a break from reviewing maps of RWD 1 with RWD 1 Office Manager Nancy Kuehler and RWD Board Chairman Tom Sloan.

Douglas County RWD 1 serves approximately 400 meters: the service area is west and southwest of Lawrence. The number of members remains relatively constant as when the economy is “good” and new homes are built, the city of Lawrence also grows in our direction and annexes both open space and “sub-divisions.” For many years, Douglas RWD 1 had a full-time district manager and a part-time office manager. The district manager had a sideline business of installing septic systems, so he served as the district’s equipment operator for new water line and meter installations.

Over the years, the board of directors has changed the way the district operates. Our initial decision was to close a very inefficient water treatment plant and purchase all water from the city of Lawrence. Not only did water quality improve (patrons frequently used more water than the treatment plant could correctly produce), but we were able to sell the water wells to a farmer and the old treatment plant to a local business that wanted to store unused equipment. We no longer must meet EPA water quality regulations concerning the production and processing of drinking water. The city of Lawrence, with more employees, a larger, more efficient treatment plant, and a significantly more sophisticated legal and management team takes care of that for us.

Next, the district’s board installed radio-read meters to better manage water use/loss issues. Prior to the installation of radio-read meters, patrons read their own meters (or did not read them) and we frequently had difficulty reconciling water sales and water purchases. The meters and equipment to read them clearly are more expensive than our previous water use reporting system, but our ability to manage the district’s operations have improved significantly. We no longer have estimated consumption reports by patrons

because the weather or their schedules did not permit them to actually read their water meter and we have a better idea when a leak occurs on either side of the meter.

Prior to installing the radio-read meters, we contracted with KRWA to test a representative sample of our water meters. As you and we expected, the district had many old meters that were not reading accurately; we were “giving” water away because of under-registration by the meters. KRWA’s meter testing results were the final determining factor in the board’s decision to spend the money for the radio-read meters and computerized billing system.

The third step in our evolution was to map our water system. The board was concerned that the only person totally familiar with our system was the district manager. He is the son of the district’s original manager and was the sole “corporate memory” of where water lines, valves, flush valves, and water meters were located. The board again turned to KRWA for assistance in mapping the district. That work was completed efficiently and professionally and we have a set of maps in the district’s truck and in our office, both in hard copy and in digital format.

The value of mapping the district became most evident when the twenty-five year veteran district manager announced at a board meeting that he was retiring in three months and moving out-of-state. Without a complete and accurate set of district maps, his successor would have been lost.

The fourth step in our evolution as a water district was selecting a successor to the district manager. The task was complicated by the fact that he also was the person who installed meters and lines, and conducted repair services. The board advertised and received almost forty applications – some of whom actually were qualified. However, in

assessing the responses and our needs, the board concluded that if the same person was not going to manage the district's assets AND perform the meter and line work, we did not need a full-time district manager.

After reviewing the applicants' credentials and considering proposals from two other Douglas County RWDs to manage our district's operations, the board voted to contract for services with Douglas County RWD 5. This decision had several immediate benefits. First, RWD 5 has four full-time operations employees – so someone is always available to meet our patrons' and system's needs. Second, because this is a contract relationship, RWD 1 does not pay benefits (we provide health insurance and a retirement system to our employees). Third, we benefit as a board and system by the exposure to new ideas (we did not use a SCADA system – RWD 5 does).

District 1's board remains fully in charge of our district. We approve purchases and actions by our contract agents, we continue to set water rates and are the contact for our patrons, and we continue to be responsible for reporting water use, etc. to the State of Kansas.

What has our board learned from these experiences? First, no matter how responsible board members believe employees to be – check on the work. We have discovered that leaks were not repaired because they were "small." Second, as a small district, contracting for water treatment and district operational maintenance makes sense from both a financial and management perspective. Third, KRWA's programs enable us to better determine our district's future. Without the maps, our new contract relationship with RWD 5 (or a new RWD 1 employee had we chosen that option) would be much more difficult. Without KRWA's leak detection program, our board would not have been as aggressive in pressing for detection and correction of problems. And without KRWA's meter testing program, we would not have been as aware of our unbilled water (compared to water leaks) situation.

I have long been an advocate for having public water systems being operated as efficiently and effectively as

Under the Services Contract, Douglas RWD 5 provides the following to Douglas RWD 1. The basis of payment presently is a flat monthly fee.

- ❖ Certified operator for the district
- ❖ Collect all water samples
- ❖ Measure and record daily chlorine residuals
- ❖ Monitor RWD 1 telemetry system to ensure proper operations
- ❖ Check and maintain all facilities belonging to RWD 1
- ❖ Oversee and maintain RWD 1 water lines, water tower, pump station
- ❖ Respond to all requests for line locates
- ❖ Order and maintain an inventory of parts and supplies for RWD 1
- ❖ Correct problems in RWD 1 distribution system including arranging for excavator to make repairs, install new services
- ❖ Disconnect and reconnect service as requested by RWD 1
- ❖ Respond to customer complaints or other problems as requested by RWD 1

possible. Thanks to the funding agencies that have allowed KRWA to partner with them in providing invaluable services that have helped rural water districts and cities across Kansas. Our board and patrons are thankful for all the benefits that our small water district adjacent to Lawrence has received as a result.

Tom Sloan has been a member of the Board of Directors of Douglas RWD 1 for 30 years and has served as chairman for 25 years. He earned a Masters Degree in Political Science from Michigan State University and a PhD in Political Science from the Univ. of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He was first elected to the 45th District's seat in the Kansas House of Representatives in 1994 and has since served on a wide range of utility-related and special committees.



"The services contract that Douglas RWD 5 signed with Douglas RWD 1 was a win/win for both districts. We needed to hire extra help and Douglas RWD 1 needed an operator. The agreement is a huge savings for Douglas RWD 1 and it also helps Douglas RWD 5 justify the additional operator that we had hired. We are trying to be a good neighbor too; it is a win/win for both districts."

*– Sharon Dwyer
Office Manager, RWD 5*