

Are we getting along or just getting by?



When individual rural water systems in Kansas counties were first being organized, the founding members worked together. They had a plan and a simple goal. It was to provide safe, clean, and uninterrupted drinking water to the members of the district. Through cooperation they found funding, built water plants and distribution systems and worked to keep costs low so that all people in the district's area could afford to join as members of the system. It was through the cooperation that most of our rural and city water systems were created and allowed to succeed.

Today, decades later in some cases, many of Kansas's water systems still operate under the same guidelines of cooperation and unity. As in all ventures however, unfortunately some do not. No one likes to admit it but in some systems, many of those early ideals have gone by the wayside. The cooperation and willingness to work for the greater good of everyone has left. In their place instead is infighting and finger-pointing. What started out as a noble endeavor has turned into in some cases a political arena where the faults of the one have outshined the good of the many. Bookkeepers and operators sometimes point fingers and lay blame on each other; board members argue among each other to achieve their own goals with benefit unit holders often caught in the middle.

So how do we get back to the ways of old and set ourselves back on the right track? It all starts how it began – with cooperation and a willingness to put personal agendas aside and work towards a better tomorrow.

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Good communication is key

Perhaps the simplest way to improve this is through conversation. An open dialog is the first step in the right direction. Conversation alone can be the catalyst for advancement. Both sides of any issue must come into any conversation with a willingness to listen to others' thoughts and concerns. With a little give and take from each side many differences can be overcome and many issues can be solved. In many districts the operator and bookkeeper sit down once a month, usually at billing time and work through the meter readings and billing together. This gives both parties a

chance to open up better channels of communication and to have a better understanding of each other's responsibilities. In the long run this can be beneficial to the system, as each party better understands their counterparts' duties they can be better prepared to assist each other.

Accountability can also be a major issue. All too often people do not want to stand up and take responsibility for their actions and responsibilities. Too many times we see an operator blame a bookkeeper (or the other way around) for a problem simply because one party does not want to be the one in the wrong. Often the entire situation could have been avoided through better communication between the two.

Perhaps the most difficult issue to deal with in a troubled system is the political agenda of individual board members. That is not to say that politics has no place in any water

system as all board members or in the case of city council members, are all in fact elected to a position. The problem arises when those personal agendas are taken too far. We all like to think the best of people, but on the same hand we have all seen or heard of people getting on a board or council with just one goal in mind. It may be to get rid of that bookkeeper or operator they believe may have wronged them in some way at some time. Can this situation be prevented? In some cases perhaps not, but if enough benefit unit holders come to the annual meeting and vote for the people they believe would best represent the district, perhaps it can.

We all want the same thing out of our water systems: clean, affordable drinking water. If we all try and do our

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part we can help make our systems a little bit better not just for us but for the future generation that will someday inherit what we have left them. The next time you go to a board or council meeting ask yourself a simple question: are we getting along or just getting by? And if we are just getting along

what can you do to help make things better?

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