

Computer Corner

Like the Boy Scouts Have Always

Said... "Be Prepared"

A Conversation on Tech

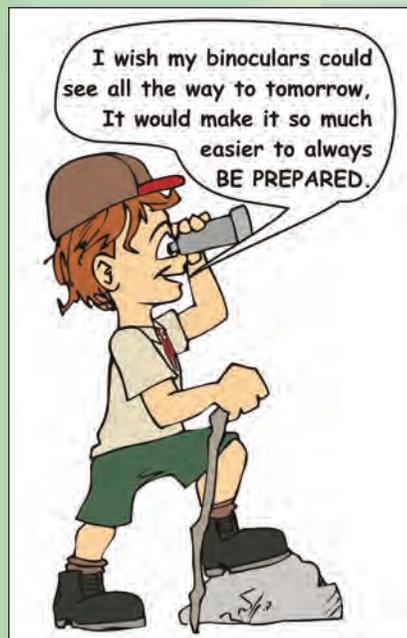
Preparedness

In 1907, Robert Baden-Powell, an English soldier, (later 1st Baron Baden-Powell) devised the Scout motto: Be Prepared. He published it in 'Scouting for Boys' in 1908. Two years later, in 1910, the Boy Scouts of America was founded. One has to wonder, eleven years later in 1918, was he ready for the Spanish Flu when it hit? He may well have been. He wrote that to Be Prepared means "you are always in a state of readiness in mind and body to do your duty."

In July 2019, the U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) website stated that less than half of all Americans have a plan in place to deal with fires, flu, floods, or a crisis of any kind. And, less than 30 percent have emergency kits ready that include water, food and medical supplies for at least two weeks. Certainly, the COVID-19 experience has been eye-opening.

Check the FEMA ([fema.gov](https://www.fema.gov)) website for emergency preparedness recommendations . . .

1. Keep an ample supply of clean, bottled water on hand.
2. Keep enough non-perishable food on hand for two weeks, along with a manual can opener.
3. Know how to shut off the gas, power and water to your home.



4. Have an Emergency Radio with the NOAA Weather band and a Flashlight. (Hand Crank and Solar Charging models are recommended. - If battery operated, have extra batteries, to ensure they work when needed.)
5. Have some emergency cash tucked away, as ATM's could be offline after a disaster.
6. Never have less than half a tank of gas in your car. If you have to evacuate, gas pumps may not be working.
7. Keep 'In Case of Emergency' (ICE) information with the names and phone numbers of contacts in a prominent place in both your Wallet and Mobile Phone.
8. Have an Escape Plan. The National Fire Protection Association says that only one-third of American households have a fire escape plan.
9. The American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) recommends that each member of the family should have an emergency 'go bag' ready to grab and go immediately. In some types of emergencies, you may literally be grabbing your bag and running for your life, so it should be a small portable bag, backpack or small suitcase with wheels. Your 'Go Bag' should include necessary items for at least a few days, to

include: water, medications, a first aid and survival kit, travel-sized bottles of toiletries, clothing, some cash including a roll of quarters and whatever other items that fit within the size and weight limitations that you deem necessary. (We included a 'backpackers' water purification filter in our own kit.)

10. Include an emergency financial first aid kit (EFFAK) in a waterproof bag. FEMA states that 99% of Americans don't think about financial and health records when planning for an emergency. Access to financial, medical, insurance, and identity documents is crucial in times of disaster.

Note, that of the ten recommendations, #1 is WATER. Imagine if in the middle of a crisis like this pandemic there wasn't clean, drinkable water flowing to American homes. The good people of the water and wastewater industry do such a remarkable job every day that the absolutely vital function they provide is often taken for granted.

The www.fema.gov website provides a checklist of recommendations and questions one should consider. These include: How will I receive warnings, news and notifications? What is our Shelter Plan? What is our Evacuation Route? What is our Family Communication plan? How do we care for our family pets?

Simply "Googling" the emergency topic, like, for instance, COVID-19, will of course, bring up a plethora of sources of information, both reputable and some less than reputable. The following is a list of official state and federal agency links, and of course, also, the Kansas Rural Water Association.

<https://www.fema.gov/>

<https://www.cdc.gov/>

<https://www.epa.gov/>

<https://www.dhs.gov/>

<https://www.kdheks.gov/>

<https://www.krwa.net>

Federal Emergency Management Agency
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
U.S. Department of Homeland Security
Kansas Dept. of Health and Environment
Kansas Rural Water Association

It is difficult to plan for the unknown, though preparedness is important for both personal life and in the workplace. Once a disaster like this hits, humans stop and think about how to be better equipped in the days, and years to come.

Police, fire, hospitals, and many others are crucial to the health and well-being of the people they serve, but, as a Kansas Rural Water Association Conference theme from many decades ago observed, 'Water Is Life'. Without the hard work, planning and preparedness of RWD boards, city councils, industry vendors,

Working "Remotely" . . .

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, some folks took a low tech, though effective, path to workplace distancing by simply packing up the computer equipment and moving it to an office employee's residence and forwarding the phone calls. Here are other ways technology is being used by smaller water systems to ensure workplace distancing.

***Data/Program Transfer:** Some transferred the utility program and data to their home computer using a thumb drive or other removable backup device like an external USB hard drive.

***PDF Printing:** For those using home computers but not wanting to use their home printers for work, virtual printing to PDF (Portable Document Format) allows them to later print to paper in the office.

***Emailing Bills and texting with customers and/or staff:** Some reduce printing of statements by emailing customer's bills and/or late notices and accomplishing other communications through texting.

***Computer Remote Access For Office Staff:** Some use Computer Remote Access options for their staff to work from home. This can be done securely. The catch is, one needs good reliable Internet services at both home and office.

***The Cloud:** While we offer cloud service for our utility program, as many providers do, none of our customers have elected to go with that method for utility billing. The Cloud affords the ability to work from any location that offers fast reliable Internet, however, there's the issue of putting sensitive financial information on the Web. There is also the concern for those times when the Internet may be down, which is one of the things people need to consider when planning for emergency scenarios. Loss of electricity would also restrict access to data, even when it is stored on a personal computer. Of course, the difference in loss of electricity and loss of Internet is that the latter might be entirely out of the user's hands, while there are ways to plan for the electrical outages. Some utility offices have less than reliable Internet even in the best of times.

***ACH:** Several water systems previously with no interest in ACH (American Clearing House) Auto-pay, customer bills paid automatically from a savings or checking account, were suddenly interested.

***Internet Pay:** While ACH is usually the favorite choice for automated bill payment because it is relatively effortless and completely secure when handled correctly, there is also Internet pay. The different ways of handling Internet payments and the associated advantages and dangers of each are so varied, we will cover this topic in the November 2020 KRWA Lifeline 'Computer Corner' column along with details concerning ACH.

Technologies for remote work and meetings

To allow staff to work from home, Thoroughbred Systems recommends checking out the following options: **RemotePC, LogMeIn, GoToMyPC, TeamViewer**, and Microsoft's **Remote Desktop**.

For years, pcAnywhere by Symantec/Norton was largely the preferred choice for business until some major security breaches occurred and support ended in 2014 with Symantec recommending customers stop using it. A 2019 PC Magazine review states: "...Some remote access apps let you use relatively weak security if you choose, but they all encourage you to choose strong security, and our Editors' Choice products, GoToMyPC and TeamViewer, won't let you make an end-run around their security precautions..." If using a wireless network a VPN (Virtual Private Network) is a **MUST** to ensure safe communication.

The remote access product TeamViewer is popular and we have had great success using it, but it has a widely used competitor, the company logmeininc.com makes GoToMyPC and other 'GoTo' products. Our software developers group likes GoToWebinar for the weekly online seminars, sometimes with hundreds of participants. LogMeInInc recently announced Emergency Remote Work Kits with three months of free use of most of their products.

Options for online meetings . . .

Webcams For Board Meetings: There were a number of phone calls wanting recommendations, e.g., "What 'Webcams' or software do you recommend for making our monthly board meetings available over the Internet like our church does for services?"

For video small work group sessions, board and council meetings, and live streaming, one can spend a lot of money very easily on video and audio equipment. But, we have found several rather inexpensive devices that work well for most water system needs. Webcam prices can go into the hundreds of dollars. However, we have recommended the Logitech 920S series of webcam cameras with built-in microphone and 'privacy lens cover' feature. It's a nice 'biggest bang for the buck' choice coming in at around \$70. With the present ongoing COVID-19 situation, many sources are listed as 'SOLD OUT'.

For webcam video group collaboration and meetings, check the price and features offered by these services: **GoToMeeting, Google Meet, Zoom** and **Microsoft Teams**. At least for now, all have some fairly fully-featured FREE and low-priced versions.

For streaming of meetings and live video streaming, the only one I can personally vouch for as working well is Twitch. However, options definitely worth researching are: Twitch, YouTube Live, Facebook Live, IRIS Bumbuster, Periscope, and Microsoft Stream.

support agencies, and so importantly, industry personnel, society would literally collapse into chaos and disaster. That puts a heavy burden on the men and women of small and large communities across the U.S.A.

Much of that 'preparedness' requires researching and becoming familiar with technologies that can help if a disaster hits. However, some technologies currently available in everyday life might suddenly be snatched away by a catastrophe making it necessary to find alternative means to continue uninterrupted operation.

During this difficult time, it is wise to take stock and ask these questions: Was our water office ready? What steps might be taken now and in the near future to better prepare for this and other scenarios?

As a software provider, we have been doing remote access computer technical support for water system customers for decades, in some cases never meeting in person. Over the years, we have also helped a few clients use technology to allow water office staff to work from home during medical recuperation, maternity leave, etc. Recently, many calls to our office have been inquiries about using technology to accomplish the work of water offices during the COVID-19 shutdown. Systems sought to find ways to allow staff to work from home to look after their children and avoid physical contact with the public. There's also been renewed interest in automated payment options, emailing of bills and other ways to avoid human contact.

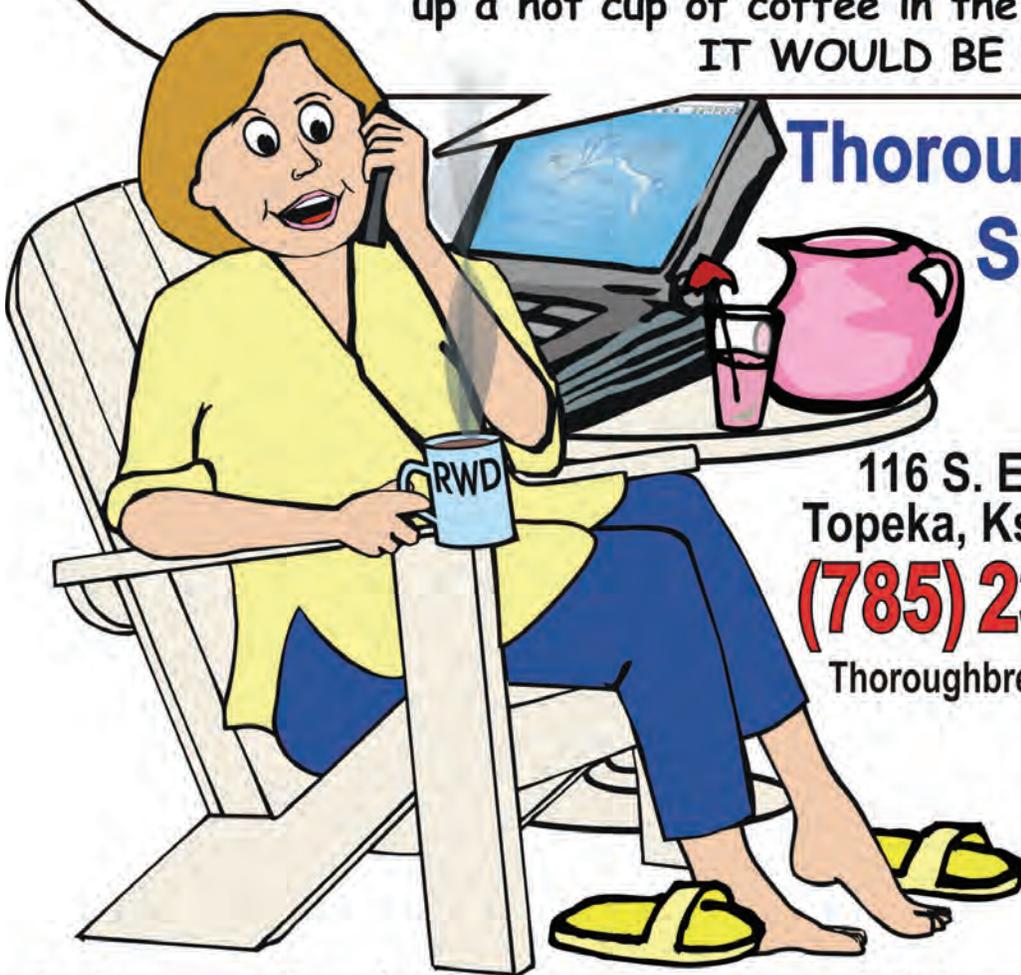
Naturally those that are responsible for planning for emergency scenarios are going to think first about protecting clean water production and distribution, but the business side of the equation requires preparedness as well. Easy to use, one-mouse-click and automated, inexpensive backups can be accomplished with Network Attached Storage (NAS) Units, USB External Drives, and online backup options (do not use ONLY online Backup options, be responsible for the data personally). A monthly auditor archive disc can be easily saved to a DVD disc. Having multiple redundant backups is the key, whichever method is used. There are several Computer Corner articles that can be reviewed on KRWA's Website www.krwa.net that go into detail on backup recommendations and no doubt there will be more in the future as this is an extremely important topic that is too often overlooked. Even a mere hard drive crash or human error can become a catastrophe to an office without backups.

Take care and remember what those kids in the scout uniforms know... Always Be Prepared!

Linda Windler and her husband Merle are owners of Thoroughbred Systems, Inc., Topeka. The company specializes in utility billing for cities and rural districts, computer networking and associated training. Contact: lindawindler@yahoo.com



We used Thoroughbred even back in the old days when customers read their own meters. Now it's electronic meter reading & I mail traditional printed bills to less than half my people, the rest are billed electronically. With queries & custom reports it's like Burger King, we can "have it our way"! I get my training, upgrades & support over the Internet & phone, which makes it easy to do my work from home during this Covid thing. There are tons of features that help with everything from water loss to keeping on top of delinquent accounts, rate code studies, work orders, mail merge letters, you name it. Now, if they could just teach my computer to serve up a hot cup of coffee in the morning...
IT WOULD BE PERFECT!!!!



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