



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Jack M. Martins

From the Desk of Senator Jack M. Martins

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March 16, 2015

ISSUE:

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One Oar in the Water

I used to chuckle when an old friend of mine would say someone had “just one oar in the water.” She was usually describing somebody who was pursuing this or that bad idea and who just didn’t see things clearly. That’s why it’s the perfect title for this week’s message.

You see, there’s yet another scheme brewing but this one may seriously damage the very delicate eco-balance of Long Island’s water system. Back in June of last year I wrote about New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio and his plan to repair the City’s aqueducts that bring water from upstate. While under reconstruction, there would naturally be some water shortages and to recoup that shortfall the Mayor decided to extract the water from – you guessed it – Long Island. His plan calls for reopening 23 wells in Queens that have been shuttered for nearly 20 years and in doing so,

diverting approximately 33 million gallons per day from the aquifer system under Long Island. As Nassau currently draws an average of about 199 million gallons daily, this represents a whopping 17% increase.

Now keep in mind aquifers are not man-made. Mother Nature created these underground miracles of clay, sand and gravel millions of years ago and they're our sole source of drinking water. There's no other alternative, no "Plan B." We don't have upstate reservoirs like the City, so it's obviously in the best interest of our three million residents to preserve our system's integrity. The frightening thing is that every expert I've heard from has made it abundantly clear that reopening these wells may pull down the water table, increase saltwater intrusion into the aquifer and redirect contaminated underground plumes. In layman's terms, the City's pumping may actually wreak havoc on our water supply.

So I did what any good citizen would do. I wrote a letter to the state's Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) Commissioner, Joe Martens last year asking that the City complete a full analysis of the environmental impact before turning them on. After all, the state requires a study when any new, single well is opened; wouldn't we do at least as much for 23 wells that have been shuttered for 20 years? Nine months later, despite reassurances from the City, as the plan moves forward we are still waiting for the City to start its study. And that doesn't surprise me. Over the years I've learned not to put much stock in promises like these. In fact, my most recent letter urges the DEC to take the lead in requiring and overseeing a study to make sure it's done and done right.

In that light I've introduced a bill to the New York State Legislature that would deem any public supply wells that haven't been used for at least two years to be considered abandoned and require a full environmental review before they could be reopened. Whether the City was rushing forward with an ill-conceived plan or not, this makes good environmental sense for all of us and is long overdue. In essence, it will protect our singular water supply from any potential abusers, including ourselves. And while I'm sure the protection of our aquifers and natural waterways may seem dull to some readers, I can assure all of you that it is one of the single most vital issues facing our region today.

Clean, safe drinking water for New York City and Long Island are equally important, not mutually exclusive. There's plenty of time for Mayor de Blasio's team to complete a full environmental study with DEC oversight, and to include a forum for public discourse. In doing so, we'll be sure that his project has more than "just

one oar in the water."