



The Editor

Tuesday, February 23, 2009

NWC OUTLINES POSITION ON ST. ELIZABETH WATER ISSUES

In a meeting held on Monday, February 23, 2009 between National Water Commission (NWC) Chairman, Mr. Russell Hadeed, President Mr. E.G. Hunter and Chief Engineer Mr. Franklyn Williams, and St. Elizabeth Parish Council Chairman and Mayor of Black River, Councillor Jeremy Palmer and Councilors Hendricks and Pagon of the St. Elizabeth Parish Council the NWC has carefully outlined its position on a number of vexing issues relating to water supply in the parish, some of which had been recently reported in the media.

The NWC team, in responding to the questions and concerns raised by the Parish Council delegation, pointed out that the NWC operates within an extremely challenging context where several factors determine the operations of the Commission. Mr. Hunter pointed out that St. Elizabeth has the lowest rainfall in Jamaica and, like much of Jamaica's south coast suffers from a deficit in the water demand as against the available water supply capacity. This he said was not only because of limited raw water sources where they are needed most, but also a history of poor settlement patterns across the country and limited resources with which to upgrade and expand the existing water supply infrastructure.

Mr. Hunter also said that a number of the water supply complaints are not the responsibility of the NWC as NWC's responsibility is limited to those areas in which it operates systems and has paying customers and that there are a number of other players in the water sector under the Government of Jamaica's Water Sector Policy. In this regard, he stated that a large part of the water demand in St. Elizabeth is for agriculture which is not the responsibility of the NWC.

“Persons repeatedly connect illegally to the NWC’s potable water supply network for irrigation purposes and thereby deprive legitimate NWC customers of good service. The NWC is not responsible for irrigation service but until more irrigation schemes are in place and persons desist from using the potable water for agriculture we are going to continue to have a big problem in St. Elizabeth,” the NWC President bluntly told the meeting.

In this regard the Parish Council delegation was advised that concerns regarding the White Hall area should be directed to the Rural Water Supply Ltd which is responsible for that project.

Mr. Hunter emphasized that NWC is required to operate as a business as its ONLY source of revenue is what is collected from paying customers each month. In spite of the severe financial challenges involved in meeting unavoidable costs relating to electricity, chemicals, pipe and fittings, wages, fuel and loan servicing from an inadequate revenue base, the NWC was spending millions of dollars to improve and expand water supply in the parish. In each case the NWC has to generate and collect the revenues to make these expenditures possible. “The NWC is not a social service and can only spend money when it collects money from customers who receive our service”, he said.

The NWC contingent updated the Parish Council team on the progress of a number of NWC projects in the parish:

- Santa Cruz Water Supply Project (now ongoing and to be completed by the end of March with subsequent distribution improvement works thereafter),
- Parottee Well Replacement Project (now ongoing and to be completed by third quarter of this year),
- Essex Valley Water Supply Project (ongoing with well already drilled and pipe-laying contractor to be mobilized so soon as issues with Alpart are resolved),
- Flagaman Water Supply Project (now ongoing with one component to be completed within weeks),
- Ongoing efforts to acquire, equip and activate an additional well at Goshen,
- And ongoing efforts to improve the water supply to Southfield and Malvern areas of the parish.

NWC President told the meeting that recent restrictions or closures of Loading Bays in the parish were not done with malice to anyone but were tough decisions required after careful technical and cost benefit analyses. The NWC President pointed out that in each case the operation of these Loading Bays cannot be done at great unrecoverable cost to the Commission or to the detriment of service to paying NWC customers and therefore means had to be found to cover the cost of operating these Loading Bays and limiting their negative impacts on the piped distribution network. On that basis Mr. Hunter said he fully supported the decision of the local NWC personnel.

Following the representations made by the Parish Councillors and given the severe impact of the prevailing drought a compromise was negotiated. Broadly, the compromise position included:

1. The NWC offered to re-open the Maggoty Loading Bay for the sole use of the Parish Council if the Parish Council would bear all reasonable associated costs.
2. The NWC would consider re-opening the Luana Loading Bay on a limited basis to facilitate limited trucking from the parish Council.
3. The NWC would undertake improved trucking to its customers not being supplied via the pipes and complaints about this should be directed to the NWC.

The meeting agreed that a detailed offer/agreement would be worked out by next week and communicated through the NWC local office. The Parish Council delegation also committed to make timely payments to the NWC for services offered.

At the end of the 2-hour meeting both parties expressed pleasure with the discussions and pledged to continue to discuss any future issues on water supply affecting the parish. The St. Elizabeth delegation thanked the NWC chairman for facilitating the meeting and Mr. Hadeed offered to continue working cooperatively with the parish council to address any future concerns.

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