

Water's Back On In Goshen

Emergency Had Been Declared

By **EMMA COLEMAN**

Trish Alphin has lived in Goshen for nearly her entire life. The 43-year-old mother of three operates a logging business with her husband. They have four dogs, a cat, a turkey and several chickens. And last week, they all went without running water for about seven days.

“Our water pressure dropped significantly in December,” Alphin said Monday afternoon. “It’s just steadily been getting

worse and worse and worse, and then last Tuesday night, that was the end of it. Some point in the night, our water cut off completely, and we haven’t had any since.”

Around 10 Goshen households were without running water this past week, before the water was restored Monday afternoon, following days of efforts by various local officials, departments and workers. Other town residents had faced low water pressure.

Last Thursday, a boil water notice had been issued for the town, and on Saturday, a state of water

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ROCKBRIDGE COUNTY Fire-Rescue’s Jon Bowden loads bottled water into the back of a pickup for a Goshen resident on Thursday, the day a boil water notice was issued for the town. Bottled water was made available for residents at the Goshen firehouse. (Emma Coleman photo)

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emergency was declared. Both the notice and the declaration will remain in place as service is fully restored.

Goshen's water system began showing signs of leaks and faulty valves in late January. The town first publicly acknowledged the problems at a Town Council meeting Feb. 1.

"There have a multitude of problems with the water system these last few days," Mayor Tom McCraw said during the meeting.

The mayor praised town clerk Sheila Sampson for the extra work she had put in over the previous weekend.

"If it weren't have been for Sheila, we might be out of water," McCraw said. "And she had some help, Mike Hicks and David Hall."

"Last Thursday was a 12-hour day," Sampson said at the meeting. "We were up there after dark along the highway. At 8 p.m., we finished. We were back up there in the cold Friday morning for about four hours. And then Sunday, another four and a half hours, with the bulk up here at the Big River tank."

The town's "water guy" had recently quit. "He's been out sick for two weeks," Town Council Member Steve Bickley said at the meeting.

Two days later, on Feb. 3, the town reached out to its residents on Facebook and asked them to conserve water.

"We are losing water out of our main water tank and currently have been unable to find the cause," the Facebook post said. "We have repaired one leak and replaced a valve that needed replaced and are still working to find the issue and make the necessary repairs. We have asked Stella-Jones to refrain from using water at this time and they have agreed, and we are now reaching out to all of you. Please do your part to conserve as much water as possible until the problem can be identified and repaired."

Rockbridge County Administrator Spencer Suter said he became aware of the problem the next morning.

"I contacted the town to offer any assistance we could provide," he said in an email Feb. 4. "The Rockbridge County Public Service Authority is sending staff out to try to help assess problem. Additionally, our department of fire-rescue emergency management is coordinating with the town as well to assess needs and see where they can assist."

But less than a week later, the town was still having issues with one of its water tanks.

"We have lost water out of our tank which is why everyone is experiencing low water pressure. We are working to locate the cause and make the repairs," the town said on its Facebook page last Wednesday, Feb. 9. "We have work scheduled for tomorrow morning which will cause the water to have to be turned off around 10:00 a.m. and it will be off for a couple of hours while the work is completed. Most residents will not have water during this time. We are praying that this repair will help us get water to start going back in the tank, which will provide the pressure you all are accustomed to having."

Then, last Thursday, Feb. 10, at about 1:30 p.m. the Rockbridge County Fire-EMS department took to social media to announce that a boil water notice had been issued for Goshen's water system's users. Cases of bottled water, provided to the town by Lowe's Home Improvement, were made available for pick up at the town's fire station.

"The town of Goshen water system is advising residents to use boiled tap water or bottled water for drinking and cooking purposes as a safety precaution," the town shared on its Facebook page that evening. "This precaution is necessary because of replacement of buried valves in the pipe along Virginia Avenue."

Bickley said Thursday afternoon that crews were actively working on making repairs to the water system.

"A couple weeks ago, we started having trouble keeping the water level up in the Rockbridge Way tank, one of the storage tanks in our water system," Bickley said last Thursday. "We did a lot of troubleshooting, found a couple of leaks, got those fixed, and the problem got better."

But one of the town's water tanks continued to lose water.

"Through the troubleshooting we did, we found out we were having trouble with the automatic controls for one of the main valves down in this Route 600 vault. So, we worked on it three or four days last week," Bickley said Thursday. "We had the valve forced open so the water could come through. The tank started returning to normal levels. And Tuesday, a crew came in to work on the automatic controls, to get us back into the normal way the system would operate. And sometime after that work, the automatic control valve failed shut. When it failed shut, we opened the bypass valve around it and found out the bypass valve around it is also broken. So, our tanks have drained down to the point that there's very low water pressure in this eastern part of the town."

The town brought in a variety of water system experts and excavators to address the problem.

"We've brought in crews from Maury River Service Authority that have been invaluable to us," Bickley said Thursday. "We've brought in a company from Richmond, Sydnor Hydro. They're actually performing some of the work replacing the control valve. And we've got S&K excavating in. They're down now at the Big River vault digging up the bad bypass valve and replacing that. So, we're

hoping by about between 4 and 5 p.m. today that bypass valve is replaced and we've gotten full water pressure back throughout the town."

Bickley said that the town had hired residents David Hall as its full-time "water guy," and several town officials were working overtime to get the system back up and running, but said he was impressed with how quickly other jurisdictions offered their help.

"We just made one or two calls, and the next thing you know, we had an army of water people. It was really good," he said last Thursday. "Spencer Suter helped coordinate a lot of it, calling the different organizations, and they came running."

Bickley said that Suter helped to coordinate much of the emergency response. The PSA supplied Goshen with parts for fixes made on Feb. 10.

"They've been great. They've supplied a bunch of parts today for the work we've got going on now," Bickley said. "A lot of the parts that we needed today are longer lead. You have to order and wait weeks for them to come in. And so we called them, and they had the parts in stock, so they loaded them on the truck, got them to us and are taking care of us."

But Goshen's water problem didn't end on Thursday. On Saturday, the town announced on its website that a state of water emergency had been declared.

"The state and federal emergency management personnel will be on site," the post on its website said that afternoon. "The town of Goshen will update you as we progress with repairs to the water system."

"We have had numerous experts in to assist us over the past week and a half and we've tried numerous different suggestions to try to make the necessary repairs to the water system and so far nothing has worked to put water back into our main water tank on Rockbridge Way," the town said on its Facebook page that evening. "We have declared a water emergency and are now working with the Virginia Emergency Operations Center to get more assistance with our situation. They are mobilizing water tankers, leak detectors and staff from the Western Virginia Water Authority to assist us. We do not have specific dates or times that these things will take place but we will keep you all informed as much as possible as we receive information."

Meanwhile, some of Goshen's residents were expressing their concerns about the water situation.

Trish Alphin's relative George Alphin, 36, of Goshen, told The News-Gazette that he had been experiencing low water pressure at his home for weeks, but his aunt, Theresa Via, 52, also of Goshen, had been without water for days.

"My aunt lives in the town limits," Alphin said. "What they noticed is, in the last month, almost two months now, a drop in pressure. She had complained quite a few times to us, 'It's taking forever for the washing machine to fill up.' And then all of a sudden, five days ago, they had no water, and they've had no water since. My aunt, my cousin and his family, who live directly beside her, have not had water, period, along with three families I know of that live directly beside the main water tank in Goshen."

"I was out of town in mid-December, and when I came back home to use water to do laundry, shower, that type of thing, I mentioned to my husband at that time, I said, 'Something is wrong with the water. Something's off,'" Via said Saturday. "This has been an ongoing issue. It's not just something that just happened overnight. And it's just gotten worse."

Trish Alphin said she noticed something was especially wrong about three weeks ago.

"I've been drinking the water my whole life. I've always loved the Goshen water. It never tasted funny or anything. About three weeks ago, I couldn't. I had to stop drinking it," she said Monday afternoon. "And that was probably right before things started taking a worse turn, as far as the pressure really, really dropping significantly."

She and the members of her family had resorted to hauling water out of their pond.

"We do have a lot of family in the area, so we have been blessed to be able to go to their houses and do laundry and take showers, but probably about 80 percent of the time, we're just hauling pond water from our pond," she said Monday. "We've just been hauling it up here and boiling it and using it for flushing the commode and washing dishes and washing off ourselves. That's what we've been dealing with as a family."

"I don't know what's going on at this point," she said Monday. "The fire department, we are going down there and getting our case of drinking water a day, which comes in handy for washing hands and brushing teeth, because as much as I boil that pond water, I really don't want my kids to brush their teeth with it. It's been nice to have the extra water for that."

But George Alphin said the bottled water wasn't enough.

"It's tough to sit here and complain about it, because I have water, and we're a lot better off than a lot of places in the world, but it's really hard to take a bath with a 12-ounce bottle of water," he said Saturday. "It's almost impossible to even be able to feel like you can go to work and face the day when all you had was a couple bottles of water to take a bath with, and some of these folks haven't had the ability to do laundry."

Alphin said he's not sure town officials heard residents' cries for help.

"People just want to know that people are hearing this. I'm not pointing fingers or anything like

that, but I read the news articles, and I watched what little bit has been on the news, and it's been all one sided that the town's doing great and this is a small situation, we're going to figure it out. And it's not the case," Alphin said. "The only thing that's been heard is the town officials' voice, and with everything that's going on in the last week, I'm not sure that the town is being completely honest with the public or the residents."

Alphin said his grandmother and other elderly Goshen residents had a hard time keeping up with any updates.

"Goshen's a small town, but it has a very elderly population who don't have Facebook or social media. They don't know this stuff," Alphin said Saturday. "I can speak for my grandmother. She didn't know that there was a boil water advisory until this morning. And I'm sure there are other elderly people out there that do not leave their home or can't leave their home, whatever the case may be, that may not have good clean drinking water. The deal with handing out the bottled water at the fire house, that's a great idea, but there's people out there that can't drive there to get that."

Via said the town ought to begin seeking a long-term solution to the water problem.

"Something needs to be done. Something long-term, not just the patching and replacing this valve," she said Saturday. "We're sitting here in 2022 with all this modernized equipment and things that we've got, and I'm thinking, why is it so complicated? Why can't there be a system put in that is not so complicated for people to grasp what's going on with it? And there are some people in this community that do know some about it. But I think that they can become so frustrated. They're frustrated, as well as the people that haven't had water for five days. I was also told that the mayor was unaware that there were people in the community that didn't have water. And I'm thinking, okay, how's that possible? How does he not know that there are residents in your community that don't have water?"

When McCraw and Bickley were interviewed on Feb. 10, almost two days after Via and Trish Alphin reported that their spigots were dry, the town officials said they hadn't heard any "reports of nothing."

"Most of what we're getting is you turn the spigot on and it's dribbling," Bickley said Thursday afternoon. "I don't believe we've had any complaints of no water. I haven't really got the unhappy calls. I've just got the curious calls, and I think Tom's been the same way. Most of the people have been extraordinarily good about it. They just want to know when's the water going to be back on."

Via said she and other town residents are frustrated.

"It's very upsetting. It's very frustrating," she said Saturday. "They keep talking about wanting to get a community center here, they want to get a county fair over here. All those things are great, don't get me wrong. That would be great for the community, great for the area. But how can you pursue these things when your town water system is crumbling? If you can't provide that basic need to the community, then how can you pursue these other things? That's kind of mind boggling to me. That should be money that is used to better this water system."

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To residents' delight, their water was restored Monday afternoon.

"We have water. Praise God!" Trish Alphin said in a text at about 3:30 p.m. Monday. "I must say, I cried happy tears."

Bickley said Monday afternoon that the Western Virginia Water Authority and Virginia Department of Emergency Management personnel had been in town to provide their help and fixed the valve causing the water cut-offs.

"A valve in the system on Route 39 was partially closed since installed in 2007," Bickley said Monday. "When the Rockbridge Way tank drained due to failure of the control valve, the partially closed valve would not let enough water through to recover the system."

Crews corrected the valve, and water began flowing through the system correctly again. Bickley said the sound of the water's return was "like a freight train."

"We believe we have the water issue fixed. We have a good flow of water going into the tank at this time and we've had reports of improved water pressure," the town said in a Facebook post Monday afternoon. "Thank you all again for being the great citizens that you are and thank you for your patience during this incident, we know it has not been easy for any of us."

The Rockbridge County Board of Supervisors ratified the declaration of a state of water emergency for the town at its meeting Monday night. The vote was 3-0. Leslie Ayers, Bob Day and Dan Lyons voted for it. Two supervisors, Jay Lewis and David McDaniel, were absent.

Suter said that among the many organizations and individuals that had helped Goshen in addition to the PSA were the Maury Service Authority, Rockbridge County Fire & EMS, Goshen Volunteer Fire Department, Rockbridge CERT (Community Emergency Response Team), the Virginia Department of Transportation and Virginia Military Institute.

The state of emergency will stay in place until officials are sure the emergency is over and the water system is operating as it should. Bickley said Monday afternoon that the boil water notice will remain as issued as the water is tested in the coming days. He predicted the notice would lift as early as Friday.

Boil Water Notice Expires In Goshen

By EMMA COLEMAN

Goshen residents are free to drink from their spigots again.

The state of water emergency and boil water noticed issued for users of the town's water system earlier this month were lifted Friday afternoon.

"Goshen Water Emergency has concluded and the boil water notice has been lifted," a notification from Alert Rockbridge said at about 4:30 p.m. on Feb. 18.

The town had been juggling repairs to its water system since late January. A handful of the system's users went without water for about seven days earlier this month. The water came back on Monday, Feb. 14, but the boil water notice stayed in effect for residents' safety.

The town shared this message on Facebook on Friday.

"The boil notice has been lifted for the town of Goshen. The health department has advised that we no longer need to boil the water. It is safe for consumption," the post on the town's page said. "We thank you all again for your patience and kindness throughout this situation."

The town expressed its thanks to area volunteers and organizations in a press release on Tuesday, Feb. 15.

"Locals Mike Jolly and several volunteers from the Goshen fire department, Mike

Hicks, Sheila Sampson, David Hall and Margaret Bickley, were instrumental throughout the weeks of dealing with the water issues, putting in many hours of work," the press release said. "We want to thank Justin Thompson and Lowe's home center for the donation of bottled water for our residents.

"County Administrator Spencer Suter helped coordinate the responding organizations. William Johnson and Jordan Combs from Maury River Service Authority were invaluable to the town providing nonstop technical expertise and support. Bobby Black from Rockbridge County Public Service Authority provided parts, personnel and assistance. Western Virginia Water Authority, led by Travis Lane, responded with experience and abilities that were impressive to observe. Albemarle County Water Authority and Virginia Rural Water provided leak detection services and support throughout.

"Others who responded to help were the Rockbridge County CERT team, the Virginia Department of Emergency Management, the Virginia Department of Health, S&K Excavating, Sydnor Hydro and Rockbridge Farmers Coop.

"The effort put in to recovering from the complex failure of the water system by the responders, is greatly appreciated by the town's leadership and residents. Thank you all for a job well done."

Goshen Eyes Grant For Water Review

BY EMMA COLEMAN

Last month, the town of Goshen declared a state of water emergency when its water system broke and some of its residents were without running water for up to two weeks. At last week's Town Council meeting, town staff reported that the system still wasn't operating correctly.

Town clerk Sheila Sampson said during the meeting March 1 that crews had been in town on Feb. 28 to install the water system's automatic controls.

"They put in those cards to run the mobile units. But they couldn't get it up and running," Sampson said.

"They're questioning that clay valve in the vault, because they turned that on, when they were out here yesterday trying to get that to open, and it's still not opening up."

During the town's water crisis, some of the water system's valves were repaired to allow its tanks to fill up and move water on their own. But Sampson said that because the valves still don't appear to be working automatically, she and the town's water system staff have been filling the tanks up manually.

"We have nothing right now to even tell us how much

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water is in the Big River tank,” Sampson said. “We’re running it based on what we’ve learned over the last several weeks. We open the valve for the bypass, and then we shut that off. Then we keep the pumps on, running a little longer, to pump the water up to the 600 tank until we think it’s got an appropriate level in it, and then we shut it off.”

Crews were expected back in town to complete the system’s automatic setup on March 2. Sampson said that she had not “had anybody complain” about low water pressure, even with staff filling the system’s tanks manually.

“We just turn it on and let it run,” Sampson said. “Today, I let it run for about an hour and a half. And the clear well started dropping, so I had to turn the pumps off. But usually, in the hour and a half, you’re pumping 320 gallons per minute for that hour and a half into that one tank. That should have been more than adequate to have a good level for them to maintain pressure up there. For the Rockbridge tank, we’ve been running it like that anyway. We run it for about two hours, and then we shut it off, because we haven’t had a good reading on it for a couple of weeks anyway.”

Town Council member Steve Bickley reported last week that the town is working with the Central Shenandoah Planning District Commission to request planning grants for an engineering review of the town’s water system.

“Because there are so many questions about what’s really here, we think it’s best to have an engineering firm come out, validate what’s really in the ground, try to identify the things that are not where the drawing says they are, and make recommendations for improvements to the system and replacement of the portion of the system that’s about 45 years old,” Bickley said.

The portion of the town’s water system that is 45 years old is in the Alleghany Circle and Furnace Hill Road portion of the city.

“Some of this outdated stuff is going to be a continuing problem. We’re seeing that now with these leaks popping up,” Mayor Tom McCraw said. “What we’re trying to do is hopefully be able to head off problems like we just had.”

The town has also been considering opportunities to expand its water system up Va. 42, outside of the town’s limits to the north. Bickley said an engineering review of the town’s system would include a look at the feasibility of that possible expansion.

“That would be the right time to do that, because if they recommend improvements to the system, we don’t want to improve the system and then add that on later and find out those improvements aren’t enough,” Bickley said. “It looks like it’s best to try to do it all at once.”

The Council member said the money for a water system project is out there.

“The Virginia Health Department has the money,” Bickley said. “It’s finally been released by the General Assembly, so that money is becoming available through the Health Department for grants like this.”

According to the Virginia Department of Health’s website, “The Virginia General Assembly allocated the Office of Drinking Water (ODW) \$100 million from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) to improve drinking water infrastructure over the next four years. ODW is leading the Drinking Water Infrastructure Initiative to manage the use of these funds.”

That was on March 4. Applications for ARPA funds for drinking water infrastructure are due May 6.

McCraw said there is a need for clean drinking water in the Goshen area, especially up Va. 42.

“These people out here really need it,” the mayor said. “Hopefully, something good will come out of this for the people out there, those 27 homes, which will increase our income from water.”

During the town’s state of water emergency last month, nine houses within the town’s limits went without running water for about 10 days to two weeks.

Council voted unanimously on March 1 to cut the February water bills for those nine houses in half, because they had spent about half the month without the water system’s services.

Theresa Via, 52, of Goshen attended the meeting and said that she was without

Engineering Bids Due On Community Center

By EMMA COLEMAN

The town of Goshen recently published its third request for proposals from engineers to determine the feasibility of turning the historic school building at 1124 Virginia Avenue into a mixed-use community center.

Those engineering proposals were due yesterday, March 8. Any feasibility studies that are completed will be paid for by a \$50,000 Community Development Block Grant from the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development that was awarded to Goshen in July 2021.

The last two requests for proposals went unanswered. But Town Council member Steve Bickley said at a Council meeting March 1 that the town’s Central

Shenandoah Planning District Commission contact is confident that some bids would come in by yesterday’s deadline.

“He said he felt like he had several companies that had called, questioning it,” Bickley said.

Goshen resident Theresa Via asked Town Council members whether bidding engineers knew that the old school building originally selected for the community center project is in a flood way.

“They already know that it’s in a flood way,” Bickley said. “They already know. The engineering firms already know it. The Department of Housing already knows it.”

Bickley said that the town would be responsible for paying for flood

insurance on the renovated building. But he noted that the town has selected an alternate site for the community center if the 1124 Virginia Ave. site doesn’t make the cut.

“We didn’t approach the community center down there with all of our eggs in that one basket,” the Council member said. “If the flood issue becomes too big to do the community center at the school, we’ve already addressed moving it up on the hill.”

The town plans to review the bids tomorrow afternoon in Goshen’s town hall building.

“We’ve set up a meeting on March 10 at 2 p.m. to review bids and select an engineering firm to come in and do the engineering report,” Bickley said.

running for about six days last month. She preferred the town kept her money.

“I prefer you kept my money and provided me with the water,” she said, with a laugh. “It was my understanding that about 15 years ago the same situation happened. And Mr. Edwards, that owned the Exxon at the time, it was my understanding that he approached Town Council and implored them not to do that, because your water, and those that buy your town decal, that’s your only source of revenue for the town.”

“If you want to pay the whole bill, that’s up to you,” McCraw said. “That’s optional.”

During her public comment period, Via implored Council to focus on making permanent fixes to the water system.

“I’ve been here all my life, and it seems we get the patch job done, the waters working. Next thing you know, there’s a leak somewhere again,” Via said. “I would just love to see something done permanent. It’s an eye opener when you come down here to your first meeting and hear that there’s part of the town system that’s 45 years old. No wonder we’re having problems. I just implore you, before we pursue other avenues, like the community center, let’s try to address and fix what’s wrong now, and then think about the community center.”

Goshen was awarded a \$50,000 Community Development Block Grant from the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development in July 2021 to determine the feasibility of turning the historic school building at 1124 Virginia Avenue into a mixed-use community center. (See separate story)

Bickley explained that money for various town projects comes from different state departments with different specialties.

“The money we’re going after on the community center is money from the Department of Housing. They don’t do water systems. The money we’re going for on the water system is from the Virginia Department of Health. They don’t do community centers,” Bickley said. “I would like to think the town can walk and chew gum at the same time, and pursue both projects.”

Via’s nephew, George Alphin, 36, of Goshen also spoke at last week’s meeting. He asked Council to be more proactive than reactive when it comes to town problems.

“I want to implore town to be proactive. There’s no reason that we had this water issue. It could have been avoided 100 percent, and in the future can be avoided. I think we’re heading in the right direction by what you were just speaking about, with the Shenandoah Planning deal. I think we’re heading there. I do thank you guys for heading that and moving in that direction,” Alphin said. “But speaking about the rat situation that everybody’s been discussing, I urge the town to be proactive in trying to resolve that.”

On Jan. 7, the town sent a letter to residents, bringing their attention to a

“rat infestation” in town and calling for “immediate action.”

“There does not appear to be any one part of town affected worse than others,” the letter said. “The sightings are widespread and frequent. As you know, rats spread disease and cause significant property damage to not just you, but your neighbors also. We must act quickly to stop this from growing out of our control.”

The letter asked residents to set up traps and place poison in crawl spaces.

“We must then clean up the areas that are harboring the rats. Winter time is the best time to clean up and expose the living and feeding areas,” the letter said. “Hopefully, these steps will prevent the need to bring in help from the health department, which could lead to citations or worse. The town has been taking action to address the most egregious areas in town, but obviously more needs to be done.”

Via said she believes some “eye sores” in town might be the source of the infestation.

“I go through what I call the main drag in and out of town, and that’s all I see. But when the water was out, I kind of made a few trips through town and I was like, ‘This could be your rat infestation problem,’” she said.

“We need to make sure our infrastructure in our town is safe,” Alphin said. “I implore Council to keep that at the forefront of their mind, not in the back of their mind.”

At each regular Town Council meeting, Council members review properties and homes in town that require maintenance. Letters are regularly sent to property owners that Council believes ought to clean up their lots.

“As far as eye sores, all you have to do is make a complaint, because sometimes we don’t see what you all see,” Council member Debbie Bowden said.

McCraw called for more resident participation in town meetings and on town committees. He addressed negative reviews that town staff and Council members received during last month’s state of water emergency.

“I’m not some of the names I was called during this water crisis,” the mayor said.

“I don’t want to say I was part of the solution during that whole crisis. I apologize for my fierceness during that two-week time. But I am thankful, and I hope you guys understand that,” Alphin said. “It wasn’t an easy task. And it’s awfully easy for somebody like me who doesn’t know a damn thing about water to go out here and tell you about getting water.”

“The people working on it didn’t know nothing about water, either,” Bickley said, and everyone in attendance laughed.

“It wasn’t easy,” Alphin said. “There were a lot of hours that were spent by people on Council and people in the town that nobody knows about. It is appreciated.”