

From The Editor | May 3, 2017

# Bleeding Blue: Issues, Opportunity Greet New AWWA President



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Airtime for water industry issues used to be a rarity in mainstream news, but that has changed of late — a development that is not particularly welcome, considering that bad news makes for good copy. (“If it bleeds, it leads.”) The long shadow of Flint’s lead crisis is still being cast over the industry, compounded by the American Society of Civil Engineers’ 2017 Report Card that graded the U.S. a D+ overall (matching its last ASCE grade in 2013), including a D+ for drinking water and a D for wastewater. We had drought, then floods, emerging contaminants of concern — PFOS/PFOA, 1,4-dioxane, and hexavalent chromium all grabbed headlines — the upheaval of the U.S. EPA, and, in a bit of good news, some federal acknowledgement and action on infrastructure needs. To be sure, water is now a national storyline.

Which is all to say that this is an important time for the industry and, by extension, the American Water Works Association, its 50,000 members, and its new president (as of June), Brenda Lennox. After 26 years of service, Lennox recently retired as manager of

customer and support services from the Tualatin Valley Water District in Beaverton, OR, and has since joined RH2 Engineering (Bothell, WA) as strategic relations manager. She is, therefore, no stranger to addressing questions or dealing with crises, suiting her perfectly for a Q&A on the state of the water industry in an era of rising consumer concerns and high-profile issues.

***AWWA advocated strongly for the Water Infrastructure Finance and Innovation Act (WIFIA), which was finally signed into law. What impact do you project, and what is AWWA's next objective on the financing front?***

It's still very early in the program, so it's difficult to project the impact it's going to have. But we've been working hard to facilitate contact between utilities and the EPA, so that they can discuss potential projects and submit letters of interest.

Certainly, the one thing we do know is that WIFIA's leveraging impact is enormous. Of the \$17 million that's been made available to seed loans, WIFIA leverages federal dollars, so that for every dollar Congress appropriates, \$50 to \$60 is expected to be loaned out. That means up to \$1.02 billion could be available for loans. That's a lot of capital projects that can begin moving forward. Our hope is that utilities will take advantage this year and demonstrate the need this program addresses, so that we can justifiably encourage Congress to increase funding even more.

***Lead is another hot-button issue, drawing scrutiny since Flint. What is the current state of America's lead issue in terms of scope and potential for resolution?***

A recent study that ran in the Journal AWWA showed that there are 6.1 million lead service lines (LSLs) still in use in the U.S. This number is a bit daunting, and it shows that overcoming this problem is not going to be easy.

Initially, resolving the problem is going to take strengthening the protections that we have in place today. AWWA's job is to help utilities implement proper corrosion control and to communicate properly with their customers on everything from filters to explaining the household action level.

Long term, we are advocating for a future where water doesn't come into contact with lead materials at all — meaning the removal of LSLs over time. Our goal is to help communities develop plans to do this in a collaborative manner that involves the utility, customers, public health officials, and other stakeholders.

***As a longtime customer and support services manager, what lessons or advice do you have for utilities dealing with concerns such as contamination threats, the need for rate hikes, or other issues?***

I can't say this enough — engage your stakeholders, media, and customers early and often. You need to form alliances and educate them on an ongoing basis. You need to have your customers' trust, so they know you're being good stewards of their money and that you take your job seriously in providing safe water. Create those relationships in advance of any problems.

I also recommend relying heavily on a team of experts from across the utility, including finance, engineering, communications, and customer service. Running a utility is not a one-team show — everyone plays a pivotal role.



***"When we think of utility workers, I think we tend to focus primarily on the technical folks. But there's a ton of other work that goes into managing a successful utility, such as succession planning, customer analytics, communications, asset management, and finance."***

***Brenda Lennox, president-elect, American Water Works Association***

***What are the major utility management considerations of the day — those being addressed by AWWA's Management & Leadership Division, of which you have been a member?***

I've always been a big fan of AWWA's Utility Management Conference, because it's the event that focuses on the nontechnical/operational side of the business. When we think of utility workers, I think we tend to focus primarily on the technical folks. But there's a

ton of other work that goes into managing a successful utility, such as succession planning, customer analytics, communications, asset management, and finance. AWWA is in the process of trying to highlight the opportunities we have available for this group more effectively, and I'm so glad to see it. This is a whole part of the water profession that often gets overlooked, and we need to tell their story better, if for no other reason than because it will help us recruit new and different professionals into the water sector.

***How about the role of AWWA's Diversity & Member Inclusion Committee, which you have also worked with?***

When I first started working in the water sector almost 30 years ago, diversity wasn't something we focused on very much, and if we did, it was primarily to make sure women were better represented. Since then, it's been gratifying to see a lot of progress in expanding the idea of what diversity means.

Over the past couple of years, my predecessor, Jeanne Bennett-Bailey, has focused on this extensively, and I've had members tell me how much they appreciate the work that she's done to elevate diversity and inclusiveness in our community. Fostering diversity and inclusion is even one of the core values in AWWA's current strategic plan, right up there with protecting public health and safeguarding the environment.

***How would you characterize the current utility labor situation? Are you optimistic or worried about keeping utilities staffed with qualified personnel?***

It's no secret that our workforce is aging, and the pool of qualified personnel is shrinking, but there are many options still available. There are many veterans available who already have the skills we need. There are young professionals (YPs), and for them many of the skills you need are second nature, even if they haven't done a specific job before. Plus, working in the water sector requires being committed to public health and a steward of the environment — YPs have demonstrated an interest in careers where they feel they are giving back. I'm optimistic, but I do have concerns as well. As we have turnover in senior staff and institutional memory walks out the door, there's going to be a blend of staff who have different values and work styles. It will lead to friction and changes, which can be uncomfortable. Some things may fall through the cracks, and it's definitely going to be different.

***How is AWWA's Annual Conference & Exposition, ACE17 in particular, helping to shape the future course of the industry?***

Given the current challenges we're facing, ACE17 offers a strong water quality focus.

We're also working to expand the conference to appeal to a more diverse and international audience. And for me, I always look forward to the networking. As someone who's come from a nontraditional water background, having those relationships has been invaluable as I've navigated my career. The people you meet at ACE become both friends and your expert resources.