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Arlington buys up more water rights

Water crucial to its plans for future growth

By [Gale Fiege](#)
Herald Writer

ARLINGTON -- Former dairy farmer Don Klein is selling the rights to the water from his well so the city of Arlington can continue to grow.

"There's no sense in pretending that the farm is productive. It's not and I'm not," the 72-year-old man said. Klein and his wife, Beverly, ran the dairy for 43 years. Now the farm is up for sale.

"I got word that the city was looking to buy water rights, so I gave them a good deal as a way to give back to the community where I grew up," Klein said. "It's payback for all the outhouses I turned over on Halloween when I was a kid."

Across the country, competition for water supplies has become intense, and smaller cities such as Arlington are caught between paying more to neighboring water utilities or finding cheaper ways to boost the local water supply. City officials have asked dozens of property owners if they are willing to give up their wells.

Arlington officials plan to pay Klein more than \$100,000 to transfer his water rights to the city.

The same amount of water Klein used to irrigate his 71-acre farm and water his 200-head of Jersey milk cows can then be drawn from the city's century-old Haller well field along the Stillaguamish River.

Arlington had a nearly 44 percent increase in population from 2000 to 2009. With a current population of more than 17,000, that's about 5,000 more people drinking water, flushing toilets, washing up and watering gardens. Despite the tough economy, the growth hasn't slowed much.

Cities need water availability in place before new construction is allowed, city spokeswoman Kristin Banfield said.

"Most people don't know that a city has to have enough water for not just its existing residents, but its future population. If you don't have the water available, you cannot grow," she said.

Many large cities and some counties in the state have reservoirs such as Spada Lake, giving them water rights that should provide for growth. For municipalities like Arlington, it's another story.

"It's likely that in the future, new water for cities will come only from the transfer of available water rights," said Andrew Dunn, regional manager of the water resources program at the state Department of Ecology.

Drinking water is going to be valuable someday, Klein said.

"I'm too old, so I won't see it," he said, "but someday I bet water will be more valuable than gasoline."

City public works director James Kelly agrees.

"Water is gold, and people take it for granted," Kelly said. "As much as it rains here, one day there will be a water shortage."

In 2006, city officials began working on obtaining other water-rights certificates that would provide water for future residents. From a list of hundreds of possible well owners, Kelly and his staff sent out 80 letters offering to buy the rights to their water.

Many declined because they want to keep their farms and irrigation systems running, Kelly said.

City officials now are negotiating with about seven property owners in the aquifer to obtain their water rights.

If all goes well and the state Department of Ecology signs off, the city will spend around \$500,000 to be able to draw another 400 acre-feet of water from its well. That's enough water for about 800 new families, Kelly said.

After each water rights transfer has been negotiated between the city and the seven certificate owners is complete, state Ecology officials must check to make sure the water rights are valid and that the transfer of rights won't impair the water resource, Dunn said.

Without the right to draw more water from its well, the city could buy more water from the Snohomish County Public Utility District. Currently just 37 percent of Arlington's supply is PUD water, which comes from Everett's Spada Lake reservoir. However, to get additional water to Arlington, a \$13 million pipeline improvement would have to be made to the water line that runs from Everett's water treatment plant.

The Haller well field and a smaller well at the Arlington Airport account for about 63 percent of the city's water supply, Kelly said. Because of environmental concerns, drilling a new well and obtaining another water right to do so isn't an option for the city.

"Buying neighboring water rights prolongs our use of the (Haller) well and it's less costly for the city," Kelly said.

Linda Neunzig runs a small farm near the Klein property. She agreed to sell a portion of her water rights and plans to use the city's payment to reinvest in her farm.

A single mom with two children, she balances a job with the county and her farm business in her quest to meet her mortgage payments

"It took awhile to think about (selling the water rights) and what that means," Neunzig said. "I'm never going to stop farming, but I no longer need the water for irrigation. Cities and farmers have to work together. That's why I live here and raise my kids here. It's a good community."

Gale Fiege: gfiege@heraldnet.com; 425-339-3427.
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