

After decades at the helm, Passaic Valley Water Commission leader to retire

Hundreds of thousands rely on the Passaic Valley Water Commission for drinking water, but few would recognize its executive director, Joseph Bella, which is how it should be.

What's important: knowing that when they turn on the tap, they will get clean water.

Few things can unravel a community faster than water problems, Bella said.

"Look at what happened in Texas," he said, referring to the February storm that left hundreds of thousands of residents without access to drinking water for weeks.

He leaves the PVWC on March 31, ending a career there that began in 1984. He assumed the directorship in 1994.

"I wanted to retire three years ago, but I couldn't just leave," Bella said. He had a few loose projects to see through, two involving getting the lead out of people's drinking water.

First there was the \$135 million replacement of the reservoirs in and around Garret Mountain with three enclosed tanks.

The tanks will allow the use of phosphates that are the standard treatment for lead. They can't be used in open-air supplies, because phosphates can also promote algae growth.

He had a protracted fight with historic preservation activists, who feared that disturbing the reservoirs would harm the Paterson Great Falls National

Historical Park and its surrounding historic district.

"I had to give it my best shot," he said.

The breakthrough came last year when the National Park Service, which had previously expressed opposition to the tanks, signed on to the memorandum.

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The hard part is over. Designs for the first of three Garret Mountain tanks are in preparation, and work should begin with the year.

The new tanks dovetail with the commission's other lingering project: replacement of water lines that run from the curb to homes and that may be lead-lined.

Bella said that as many as 14,000 may need replacing, and the agency has secured \$26 million in funding for the job.

"We are doing an inventory, digging curbside to get a handle on how many lines need to be replaced," he said.

Depending on the number, it could take several years to complete.

While those projects are teed up for his successor, Bella cited his oversight of the \$80 million water treatment plant in Little Falls as another legacy he leaves behind.

"We get people from all over the world who come and look at it," he said.

PVWC is owned by the cities of Paterson, Clifton and Passaic. In addition, it

supplies water to Prospect Park, Lodi, North Arlington and part of Woodland Park and to wholesale customers around North Jersey. Bella's annual salary was \$226,000, according to public records.

PVWC Commissioner Joe Kolodziej, Clifton's representative, said Bella is a water industry leader and a pioneer in water treatment processing.

"I want to thank Joe for his hard work closer to home as he has tirelessly ensured that the quality of PVWC water often exceeds state and federal safety standards," Kolodziej said.

The commission is hiring a search firm to identify candidates to replace the executive director.

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