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CELEBRATING BABY STEPS TOWARD REGIONAL SERVICE

There's a reason that proud parents celebrate Baby's First Steps with video recordings and photographs. While small and tentative, they are an important milestone of forward movement toward a child's confidence, strength and future achievements.

The same can be said for life here in the Lehigh Valley, where we are faced with big challenges and "growing pains" in a variety of arenas including clogged transportation arteries, rapidly expanding school systems, housing booms and busts, job market fluctuations, environmental preservation needs, and more. Recognizing that only small, incremental changes are ordinarily possible in these areas, we should celebrate progress in whatever form it takes.

This week provides an example of municipal cooperation and regional thinking that is worth such a celebration. On Thursday, March 15, Lehigh County Authority (LCA) and the Borough of Emmaus completed a water system agreement that begins cooperative efforts and a sharing of resources between the two entities that will benefit customers of both systems.

By transferring its out-of-borough water customers to LCA, Emmaus has gained the ability to better manage its in-borough system to the benefit of borough residents. By acquiring the out-of-borough water customers, LCA will ensure that they are served and represented by a public water utility that is already providing services in those neighboring communities. Both groups of customers will benefit from more efficient and cost-effective service, local control of natural resources, and interconnections that will provide a more regional approach to service.

To some, a big celebration about a small group of water customers (400 homes are affected by this change) may seem out of proportion. However, when we consider the typical fragmentation of water service across the Lehigh Valley, this type of positive, cooperative approach to solving problems is one of those baby steps worth celebrating. LCA and Emmaus officials will build

upon this cooperation through an interconnection that will enhance supply management for both systems.

Another recent achievement in this arena is the long-term lease agreement between the City of Easton and Easton Suburban Water Authority for the water treatment plant that serves both water systems. While this lease arrangement was met with skepticism by some, the customers of both water systems stand to benefit from the new regional approach. By leasing the plant and transferring operating responsibility to the authority, the city will benefit from continued public control of its resources and financial stability through annual payments from the authority. The authority will benefit from the economies of scale gained by operating on a more regional basis, and authority officials report that a cooperative working relationship with the city is developing nicely.

Water utilities across the Lehigh Valley have enjoyed a long history of partnering on certain issues, such as the Lehigh Valley Water Suppliers, Inc.'s annual youth outreach programming. It seems natural for utilities to build on that base of cooperation by developing service arrangements that make economic sense for the region and its citizens. These discussions can become complicated by municipalities' concerns about losing their identity, losing control of their resources, and the logistical challenges of blending supplies, workforces, finances, etc. The examples noted here show that changes, even small ones, can have positive results.

The issue of regional thinking about water and waste water resources is the topic of recent efforts by Renew Lehigh Valley (www.RenewLV.org), a coalition of leaders who are working to advance a policy agenda of improved approaches to address the growth that is occurring in our region and its associated impacts on vital public services. The group's water regionalization sub-committee, of which LCA is a member, is spearheading a research project with the American Water Works Association Research Foundation to interview the professionals at Lehigh Valley utilities and study the economic feasibility of various models of water system consolidation alternatives that might make sense here.

While the results of that study are not yet available, we look forward to learning how cooperative, regional arrangements may enhance the services we provide to our communities. After all, as water utilities, it is providing reliable, high-quality service at a fair price to Lehigh Valley citizens that should be foremost in our minds.

The recent baby steps utilities are taking toward a more cooperative, regional approach to service are worth celebrating because they mark forward movement on a challenging issue of great importance to our region, our environment and our citizens. The small steps we take today will lead to greater strides we can take tomorrow.