

PROFILE

DC Water chief: right place, right time

Investing in water infrastructure is a moral imperative

WASHINGTON, DC: When George Hawkins, general manager of DC Water, starts talking sewer, people listen.

Hawkins, who runs one of the largest and most advanced wastewater treatment plants in the world, has built his career fighting for the public good, but considers his current job to be one of the most influential and important places to effect responsible environmental change.

“This morning we had a line break (in a pipe) that was put in in 1858 – before Abraham Lincoln was president,” Hawkins began in his public address at the American Water Summit, as he drove home the message that at its current rate of investment, Washington D.C. will need 300 years to replace pipes that have been in use since the 1800s.

Hawkins has been the general manager of DC Water since late 2009. The system provides wastewater services to 600,000 residents, 700,000 District employees, and 16.6 million visitors a year, all from one plant, the Blue Plains Advanced Wastewater Treatment Plant, with a capacity up to 1 BGD.

Under Hawkins, the agency will spend approximately \$3 billion in the next 10 years for nutrient reductions, combined sewer overflow (CSO) elimination, and a biosolids digester at the treatment plant. As a result of \$1 billion spent in the past ten years, DC and Maryland were the only states which met the nutrient reduction goals in the Chesapeake Bay for 2010. For system maintenance, DC Water is ramping up their pipe replacement rate from 0.3 percent per year to one percent per year. Under Hawkins, DC Water has also set up a system, driven by GIS mapping, of wastewater charges for impervious cover on residential properties, to reward

residents whose properties have good drainage.

Hawkins has raised sewer rates to pay for all of these improvements.

“We just increased rates by a total of 18% between last year and this year which in a recession is hard to do,” said Hawkins. “The average bill went from \$52 to \$60 a month. That is not an insignificant increase.”

Given that the average water-sewer rates in the US are approximately \$35/month, the increases have been controversial, and Hawkins has been a target of criticism by some on Washington D.C.’s city council.

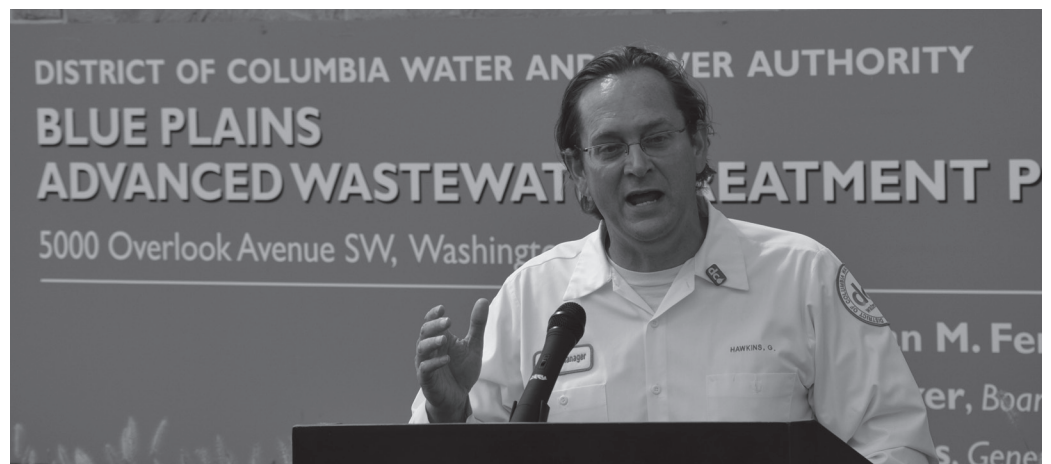
“Subway systems need repairs, and so do roads, but you don’t see fares or tolls skyrocketing,” D.C. city council member Jim Graham said at a February 2010 meeting, according to the New York Times. “Providing inexpensive, reliable water is a fundamental obligation of government. If they can’t do that, they need to reform themselves, instead of just charging more.”

Hawkins disagrees, pointing out that increased mandates from the EPA and a 300-year pipe replacement system make investment a moral imperative.

“We know we’ve got to go out there and seek these rate increases; there’s no two ways about it,” said Hawkins. “The bill is due; the time is now.”

For Hawkins, this message is not just about good business sense. Rather, it comes from his many years of experience in a career dedicated to protecting the environment, and his conclusion that one of the most important changes Americans can make is in investing in water related infrastructure.

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“I discovered...that what we need to do is revitalize our cities as a powerful component of almost any environmental issue you care about,” said Hawkins. “You want to save habitat – well, rebuild cities instead of taking out habitat. You want to save farm land – well, rebuild cities instead of taking out farmland.”

Hawkins’ interest in water infrastructure came out of heavy involvement in land use issues in New Jersey, where he worked for eight years as executive director of two environmental advocacy groups. During this time, as Hawkins sought to limit urban sprawl, he recognized that one of the fundamental questions in urban revitalization is whether the infrastructure that is already in place will be attractive enough to draw populations in.

A lawyer by profession, in 2007 Hawkins returned to the policy world, as head of the District Department of Environment, lead agency in the city to administer EPA mandates. The city’s Water and Sewer Authority’s board members unanimously appointed him as its manager in 2009, impressed by his communication skills and candor.

“I jumped at the chance,” said Hawkins of the opportunity to manage DC Water. “It’s a job that connects to the reality on the ground, something that’s meaningful to both the people and the environment, a place that all the grand policies we ponder have to be turned into boots on the ground reality, in a city that matters, in a place that people watch.”

One of Hawkins’ achievements to date at DC Water has been to bring public recognition to the work that DC Water does through an active rebranding effort. DC Water has had a legacy of image problems. The last manager, Jerry Johnson, was voted out by the board, who determined the public had lost confidence in the agency after reports of high levels of lead in the District’s water spread through the city.

Hawkins believes that one of the problems that utilities face is that they are essentially invisible to the population, which makes understanding why they need more money difficult to understand. The rebranding began with a name change for the agency from the Washington Water and Sewer Authority and a new logo that included the slogan, ‘Water is Life’.

“We changed our name, we changed our logo, it’s all over our trucks,” explained Hawkins. “We have a Facebook page, Twitter, Flickr. And now we’re getting reports all the time ‘Oh, we see your trucks all over the place.’” They were always there, “(but people) just didn’t know we were there.”

Replacement of lead pipes throughout the city continues still and DC Water has now met federal water quality standards for lead. But, Hawkins says, communication with his customers is still a challenge.

“Our biggest challenge is expectations. We have found most people wouldn’t mind if they always had water and sewer bills that were \$100 a month. Like cell phone and cable bills, they’d be used to it, you just pay it. But when the bill is \$50 a month and it goes up to \$60 that sounds too high. They don’t say ‘Oh my gosh, the level of what it takes under the street to deliver it here is amazing!’ So the challenge has not been to explain to people, once we get their attention, what we do and why it

should matter, it’s getting people’s attention in the first place.”

Hawkins agrees with those that argue about the basic human need for water, but counters their assertion that this means that the infrastructure that delivers the water should be without cost.

“I agree on the level that water is a basic human right,” said Hawkins. “But the minute it hits a pipe, it’s hitting something that costs money. So we’re not charging for the water per se, we’re charging for everything else that’s needed.”

The challenge, in Hawkins’ view, is in getting the public to recognize that infrastructure comes at a cost, but that with education, the message is received with support. “We have found that when people really start thinking about it – when we get their attention – they’re fascinated,” said Hawkins. “It’s getting their attention that is our biggest challenge and overcoming the expectation that this should be free.”

Hawkins sees public water operators as being uniquely positioned to do just that, noting that they have inherent advantages over activist and environmental groups.

“What does our institution have that non-profits or other advocates die for?” asked Hawkins. “All of us send a bill to all of our customers every month. We communicate with virtually the entire population of this country through a system that we already have in place. If we all knew as an industry what we all wanted to get out of this, the funding we needed, the support we needed, the changes to the laws we needed, we could generate an uprising with people we already communicate with, if we organize ourselves.”

Those who have worked with Hawkins say that his ability to communicate complex issues to groups of multiple stakeholders is one of his most powerful assets.

“He is such a good communicator and a very dynamic personality. He’s good at getting people to see things in a new way,” says former colleague Chris Sturm, Senior Director of State Policy for New Jersey Future. “He was really fun to work for because he had a knack for making complex things simple. He could distill these long, complex issues in easily understandable ways.”

Bill Bertera, executive director of Water Environment Federation, says that while engineers have traditionally headed utilities, having communicators such as George Hawkins will be essential in bringing much-needed public awareness about the desperate need for infrastructure investment.

“(George Hawkins) is one of the most vibrant personalities in our industry, he is a great representative, and has a great character,” said Bertera. “Most municipalities have engineers leading the organization, and many of our engineers do not communicate as well as him. He is a person of a very different character, in the best possible way.”

Indeed, in an environment where the importance of water infrastructure easily gets lost amidst concerns about jobs, wars and the stock market’s health, Hawkins’ message is refreshingly simple. “I would argue that nothing less than human civilization relies on a very small number of fundamentals, and water and sewer is principal among them,” said Hawkins.