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Friedens celebrates water system completion

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Luella Herwig is glad that Friedens has a new water system even though she is now out of a job.

"Our water came from an old coal mine; it was treated, but it smelled and we had a lot of red water," she said. Herwig has lived in Friedens since 1964. She was the secretary of Highland Mutual, the old water company.

"I've lost my job, but I'm glad," Herwig said. "It was a volunteer job anyway."

The Rev. Ed DeVore, pastor of Friedens Lutheran Church, said Highlands Mutual had just over 30 customers.

"The (water) pressure was very bad," he said. "The quality was poor. The water didn't smell here (at the church) but it did behind the post office. The water was colored here and the church required a roomful of equipment, a pressure tank and a pump to clean it. When we built this building in 2005 we had a lot of problems because of the water."

People were gathered at the church Thursday morning to celebrate the completion of the Friedens water system, which is being operated by the Somerset Township Municipal Authority. Water is now coming from the Quemahoning Reservoir.

"The water is now clean and pure, it's fantastic," DeVore said. "We have enough water pressure — we can flush all the toilets at the same time. This is a vitally important project for this community."

Jon Wahl, project manager with Somerset Planning and Engineering, said discussions began before 2002. Bob Bastian, who was then state representative, held a meeting for people from the various water companies and suggested they consolidate. The water companies said no. In 2002 Bastian brought in officials with the state Department of Environmental Protection who explained that it isn't



A symbolic ribbon-cutting was held for the Friedens Water System in front of Friedens Lutheran Church. From left: David Shaulis, Somerset Township Municipal Authority; James Beener, authority solicitor; Jay Tarara, retired from the Department of Environmental Protection; county Commissioners John Vatauvuk, Pamela Tokar-Ickes and Jim Marker; Jon Wahl, project manager with Somerset Planning and Engineering; Carmel D'Arrigo, authority chairman; Mark Rankin, authority secretary; Bob Bastian, former state representative; Nancy Aultz, authority manager; and David Hottle, authority board member. (Staff photo by Vicki Rock)

cost-effective for small water companies to comply with state rules and regulations.

Jay Tarara, who is now retired from the DEP, recalled that meeting.

"If you had taken a topographic map and placed a dime over Friedens, it would have covered nine public water supplies (companies) that would have had to come into compliance," he said. "The pushback was, 'No, we won't. Thanks for coming. Here's a cup of coffee. Drink it on your way to your car.' I only planted the seed. All of you fertilized it and watered it, and now you're able to harvest the fruits."

It was when the Somerset County and Cambria County commissioners formed the Cambria-Somerset Authority and purchased the Quemahoning Reservoir and other properties that the water project became feasible.

Patience was a key factor in the whole project, Bastian said.

"You don't know how important water is until you don't have it; or you have it and you can't drink it or use it to wash your clothes," Somerset County Commissioner Pamela Tokar-Ickes said. "When your water is good, you don't give it much of a thought. The small water companies were willing to give up what they had. It is one thing to have vision and another to seize the opportunity."

The \$4 million Friedens project was funded by state grants and a \$700,000 loan. Glenn Johnston Inc., McKeesport, was the construction company.

"We were just happy to participate in a project that helped a community," Cara Halloran, president of Glenn Johnston Inc. said.

Dutchland Inc., Gap, built the water tank that will provide water for the system and supplement the fire fighting water supply.

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