



NEW YORK'S WATER AND DISTRIBUTION OPERATORS: "ARE WAGES EQUAL TO RESPONSIBILITIES?"

By Douglas R. Smorol | Circuit Rider

There is a disturbing trend in our industry recently of certified operators leaving our municipalities to find work in the private sector. Many will find work in a completely different field, while others may find work relevant to their current positions. The driving force behind this exodus seems to be the relatively low pay scale that most municipalities use to compensate their employees. Although municipal jobs have never been considered as high paying, there used to be perks and benefits that would help offset the relatively low compensation. As municipalities tightened their budgets, auditors and trends in the insurance industry reduced most of these perks to ancient history. If you ask decision makers or board members, "What is the appeal of municipal work?" many would answer "It's steady work" or "It's not as physically demanding as other jobs". You can always tell which of these board members, mayors, or supervisors have never been to a water main break in the middle of the night or answered the phone when complaints of rusty or foul tasting water start rolling in. The responsibility of being a certified operator of a community public water supply is twentyfour hours a day, three hundred sixty five days a year. The wellbeing and health of each member of the community is in the hands of the operator on a daily basis. These men and women deserve a reasonable standard of living for their efforts. Too often I have heard the argument that the town or village cannot afford to pay higher wages. This is ludicrous, or does it mean that they are unwilling to ask the voters and taxpayers to pay a fair price for the services they receive. The water supply is a business and the operator's wages and benefits are operating costs incurred by the business, the same as utility bills or the cost of chlorine. Municipal employees must be able to maintain the standard of living within the community in which they live.

If you could find someone who is willing to work for lower wages, would they possess the skills and intelligence required to become a certified operator? Would you be able to trust them with the health and well being of the entire community? Whatever compensation your community decides to pay your certified operator, here are two points to ponder:

1. **How much will it cost the community to keep your certified operator?**
2. **What will it cost the community if he leaves?**

As I travel throughout New York State, I have the opportunity to talk to many certified operators, mayors, supervisors and board members. I listen to their problems and sometimes we share a good laugh, but I definitely can see that down the road we are going to have problems keeping good people in these operator positions. Many young people now choose to get a college education and take advantage of the career opportunities a college degree can produce. Who will safeguard our drinking water ten, fifteen, twenty years from now? If a board member makes \$40,000.00 dollars per year, and struggles with his family's finances each month, how can he or she ask a municipal employee to make due with \$30,000.00 or \$32,000.00 per year? You would be surprised at the number of municipal employees who must work two jobs to make ends meet.

It is time for all villages, towns, and small cities to recognize the need to improve upon the salary requirements of our drinking water professionals, our certified operators! These men and women are critical in providing "Quality on Tap"! 💧💧💧

