

Wednesday, January 21, 2004

Baton Rouge, Louisiana

**WATER, WATER EVERYWHERE**  
**AND NOT ENOUGH TO DRINK**

Louisiana is surrounded by water. The Mississippi River to the east, the Sabine River to the west, the Gulf of Mexico to the South, and major lakes (Lake Caddo, Lake Darbonne, Lake Providence) to the north. It's hard to believe that we are rapidly approaching a water crisis in our state. But we are.

There have been some piece-meal efforts in the legislature to develop a statewide water policy. A major effort was made last year by Senator James David Cain of Dry Creek, but a variety of special interests opposed any real meaningful coordinated effort. Senator Cain put it well: "Our hopes of having a statewide policy really got watered down."

There are three major underground aquifers serving as the prime source for the state's water supply. All have problems.

In the Baton Rouge area, some fifty million gallons of water a day are pumped from fresh water wells to supply local needs. But there are obvious concerns of future saltwater intrusion, and the Capitol city could be facing a major crisis in the next eight to ten years. As one can imagine, there is not a lot of enthusiasm to follow the New Orleans example of taking your drinking out of the Mississippi River. Just up the river from Baton Rouge, Georgia-Pacific at Port Hudson is using some sixty million gallons a day for industrial purposes. That's right. Sixty million gallons a day. And they are located right on the Mississippi River. There would be an additional cost to treat and soften the river water, so there is no incentive for the company to conserve the hundreds of millions of gallons that could be eventually directed towards Baton Rouge. Again, no statewide water policy.

In Tangipahoa and St. Tammany parishes, many communities have "unmetered" water. A flat fee is charged no matter how much one uses. Therefore, there is no incentive to save. If you want to see the greenest grass in the state, drive through Beau Chene subdivision in Mandeville. Homeowners pay a flat fee, and can use unlimited water 24 hours a day. Again, no statewide water policy.

There is also a lack of coordination as to who is responsible for protecting our water. Under the Federal Safe Drinking Water Act (SDWA), the Department of Health is responsible to be sure that all well water is safe. But the Department of Environmental Quality regulates all the wastewater in the state as well as the various sewer treatment plants. Yet, it is the Department of Transportation that issues permits for various water wells that are drilled. All water oversight should be coordinated through one state agency.

And a note to those who are concerned about terrorism. Anyone can go on the Department of Transportation website and find the exact location of every water well in the state by latitude and longitude. Wanna know where Britney Spears lives? The DOTD lists “Britney Spears Well Number One” at its exact location by her home.

There are certainly some instances of good-faith efforts to preserve the state’s fresh water supply. A few examples:

1. Crown Zellerbach in Bogalusa has built retention ponds to catch some rainwater.
2. Developer James Davison in Ruston went to the extra expense of building lakes to contain rainwater on his Squires Creek golf course development.
3. Former State Representative Harry Hollins, years ago, was successful in passing legislation that authorized and funded a canal from the Sabine River to Lake Charles. A number of industries in the Lake Charles area use this diversion water for their needed water supply.
4. The new legislature has a chance to make amends for poor planning in the past. There will certainly be significant opposition, but a well-thought out statewide water policy with proper incentives and penalties will go a long way to keep our drinking water available and safe for years to come. If not, we face quiet a crisis.

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I posted a column each week during my six-month “sabbatical” last year and received a variety of reader comments. I suppose the largest number of positive responses concerned my missing the taste of Krispy Kreme donuts. I thought about my favorite Krispy Kremes last week when two stories appeared in the national media.

First was the major investigation, reported in the Wall Street Journal, of “Donutgate”. A fellow named Robert Gagond was sentenced to federal prison for donut fraud. That’s right! Donut fraud. The FDA brought charges against him for making claims that his donuts used cooking oil that was low in saturated fat. Where most donuts have some 18 fat grams, Gagond claimed only 3 grams of fat in his fried delicacies.

Can you believe that we now have food police? They seized 18,720 donuts from Gagond’s factory. I wonder what they did with all of the donuts they seized?

Now let me give all of you readers a tip. There are no diet donuts. You can’t make a diet donut; at least one that has any taste to it.

When anyone goes to jail, the first thing they are asked is what crime they committed. I can just picture Robert Gagond.

“What are you in for?” a fellow prisoner asks.

Gagond rolls his eyes and say “Donut fraud”.

Which of course brings up the next story of interest.

The President announced that we are going to Mars. That’s right! It may cost us \$200 billion, but we are going to Mars. And I got to thinking. What if we diverted a little of that money toward scientific research on a diet donut? Who knows! In the years to come, Gagond may be considered a real visionary.

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Now that I have a little bit of time on my hands, my reading habits have changed. As a big sports buff, I still read over the sports page each day. And as I get older, I am more tuned in to the obituary columns. (I recognize more and more names as each year passes by.) But my new interest is the comics. I can’t remember reading them in years past. Oh, I’m sure I did as a kid. Peanuts is gone, but Blondie is still around. I really like the Wizard of the Id, B.C., Dilbert and Zits. (Zits has been the mirror image of my son for the past three or four years.)

But my favorite since I’ve started a daily review has been Doonesbury. Conservatives hate the column because it is so tough on Bush. Democrats used to hate the column because it was right on the mark with Clinton. If Gary Trudeau can rile the ire of both Republicans and Democrats, he must be close to being right on the mark. But not so, according to a survey in the Times Picayune. A recent survey by the paper asked their readers to name its favorite and least favorite comic strips. Some of my choices did OK. Zits was on the list and rated third, with Dilbert a strong fourth. Doonesbury was rated not just last, but a distant last. There was overwhelming response that this first-rate political satire was at the bottom of the barrel, at least by readers of the state’s largest paper. To you Doonesbury fans, you are part of a small group of us that have to admire Trudeau’s brilliant satire and wit in the privacy of our own homes. Just don’t tell anyone you read it.

Cest la vie.

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Monday was errand day. I drove around town, taking care of a number of odds and ends that had gathered up since the holidays. If you take the time to observe, it's amazing what you see. A few observations:

Going in the drug store. The prescriptions are always located at the back of the store. So the sick have to walk all the way to the back, while healthy people can buy cigarettes at the front. Go figure.

Stopping at the bank. Why do the banks leave both doors to the vault wide open, then chain the ballpoint pens to the counters?

At the grocery store. The kids wanted hot dogs. Have you ever looked at what you bought? I did for the first time. We buy hot dogs in a package of ten, yet the buns come in packages of eight. I'm sure there is a good reason.

At Burger King. A lady in front of us ordered a double cheeseburger, super size fries, and a diet coke. A diet coke?

Just a few thoughts from my day.

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*True patriotism hates injustice in its own land more than anywhere else.*

Clarence Darrow

*Politics is supposed to be the second oldest profession. I have come to realize that it bears a very close resemblance to the first.*

Ronald Reagan

Peace and justice to you and your family.

Jim Brown