

How three towns outside Philly became ‘trailblazers’ on clean drinking water

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In 2016, amid public panic and bureaucratic confusion over the water contamination affecting tens of thousands of Bucks and Montgomery County residents, Horsham Township officials wanted to make the municipal drinking water safe. They decided to aim higher than the cleanup threshold recommended by the Environmental Protection Agency — even if water customers and taxpayers had to cover the cost themselves.

They planned an ambitious project that included building and installing six water filtration systems to remove all traces of per- and polyflouroalkyl substances — or PFAS, which have been discovered in communities nationwide and are linked to health problems including cancer — from their public drinking water.

Three years later, it's nearly finished. Horsham and its neighbors Warrington and Warminster Townships appear to be the only municipalities in the country that have acted to remove all traces of PFAS from their water supplies, according to local officials and the Association of State Drinking Water Administrators.

“I’d like to consider us trailblazers,” said Tina O’Rourke, the Horsham Water and Sewer Authority’s business manager, looking ahead to the completion of the township’s long-term plan in the coming weeks.

The contamination in the three townships was caused by firefighting foam used on nearby military bases. The military has accepted responsibility for cleaning up the contamination and remediating some wells using a standard recommended by the Environmental Protection Agency.

But officials and residents in those townships believed the military’s cleanup didn’t do enough to ensure that their water was safe. All three townships purchased clean water from other suppliers after the contamination was discovered, in addition to other steps. To cover costs, however, they had to add surcharges to customers’ water bills.

They “have the highest water standards in the entire country [for PFAS],” said State Rep. Todd Stephens of the three townships Wednesday, adding that other places have asked his office about Horsham’s process. “They truly are leaders.”

Horsham’s more than \$10 million project, funded with the help of state grants, includes filtration systems for five drinking water wells, a filter for water coming from another supplier, and nearly two miles of new water mains to assist residents with private wells. That work is in addition to the military’s remediation efforts, which provided filters for five wells and public water hookups for 98 private well owners.

The township plan includes getting filters up and running on five wells for which the military did not fund treatment. As of Friday, O'Rourke said, all but one were in service; the fifth will be active any day.

The township also built nearly two miles of additional water mains to connect homes with private wells to public water. The military paid to connect private wells to public water if they had contamination above the EPA advisory level, 70 parts per trillion. But 70 more homes had at least 40 parts per trillion, O'Rourke said, and have not been eligible for military cleanup.

With the water-main extension, homeowners who want to connect to public water and abandon their wells still have to pay about \$15,000, O'Rourke said, cutting the potential cost in half. She said several households have already been connected to public water. Horsham received a \$10 million state grant in 2016 to fund the project. A new infusion of state money for Horsham, Warrington, Warminster, and Warwick Townships announced by Gov. Wolf last week is set to help further. The money will go to eliminating surcharges on the water bills for residents in Warminster and Horsham and improving infrastructure in the townships.

Stephens, who grew up in and represents Horsham, pushed for funding including Horsham's large grant and now has a proposal in the state legislature that would create a new stream of tax revenue earmarked for remediation of PFAS contamination. It would also provide for the creation of a program to address PFAS statewide, "so that we can do exactly what we did in Horsham for other communities," he said.

"As more time goes by with the continued lack of action by the federal government, I think it becomes even more apparent that the steps that Horsham took were critical in ensuring that the residents have safe drinking water," Stephens said.

The state also approved \$8 million in grants to Warminster and Warrington in March, which Warminster is using to install treatment systems that will allow their wells to go back in service, the state said when announcing the funds. The Warminster Municipal Authority was unavailable for comment this week.

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Christian Jones, director of Warrington's water and sewer department, said the township's water comes from the North Wales Water Authority, which is now in the process of purchasing Warrington's water system. (Officials in Warminster are also discussing selling the township water and sewer systems.) North Wales will likely still use the grant funding to install filters on Warrington's wells, Jones said.

The Department of Environmental Protection began a program in the spring to sample water systems for PFAS statewide to determine whether the contamination is more widespread than currently known. As of Thursday, the DEP had collected 125 samples; so far, none has tested higher than the EPA's health advisory level, said spokesperson Elizabeth Rementer. In October, the first batch of sampling results are set to be posted online.

“It’s local government, state government, Republicans and Democrats all working together to solve a problem. That’s what a government’s supposed to do for its residents,” Stephens said.

Though Horsham’s plans have been successful in cleaning drinking water — and, said Stephens, dispelling much of the initial fear that the tainted water would sink the township’s prospects — officials have said they want the military and federal government to reimburse the township and take responsibility for the fallout from the contamination.

“If a local community can come up with a short-term plan in six weeks and a long-term plan in 12 weeks,” Horsham Township Bill Walker said at the May meeting, “it shouldn’t take the federal government five years.”

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