

Their View: State College Borough Water Authority comfortable with Toll Bros. development

By Jeffrey R. Kern

The Centre Region is fortunate to have an abundance of clean safe groundwater.

For the most part, nearly all of the Centre Region's residents drink and use water brought up from the ground by modern efficient pumping, filtering and delivering systems. There are seven well fields served by 23 wells. On a daily basis, the State College Borough Water Authority delivers between 5 million and 6 million gallons of high quality, clean water. On a comparative basis, our water has been exceptionally clean and our costs have been low.

The Centre Region is composed of multiple municipalities; each with its own zoning ordinances and land-use orientations. The well fields serving as the water source for the Centre Region cross six municipal boundaries. In total, the well fields involve nearly 49 square miles — or nearly 31,000 acres — of Zone II well head protection area. The authority owns or controls little surface land. The geology and soil conditions in our valley yield large quantities of water but also yield risks of infiltration and inflow of surface contamination. The authority cannot possibly afford to purchase all of the land serving the well fields. Our continued access to abundant clean water is dependent on good stewardship of the land, knowledge of the geology and soil conditions, ongoing monitoring of water quality, and the cooperative land-use policies of each of the region's municipalities.

There has been a lot of controversy concerning the proposed Toll Bros. student housing development near the intersection of Blue Course Drive and Whitehall Road in Ferguson Township. The land area is within the recharge area of two of the authority's highly productive well fields: the Thomas and Harter well fields. This land was rezoned in 2004 by Ferguson Township to permit high-density residential development. The 40.4-acre proposed Toll Bros. development is a permitted use within the Zone II Well Head Protection area. The Zone II Well Head Protection area for the Thomas and Harter well fields is made up of more than 10,000 acres. The proposed development is less than 1 percent of that area.

When the development was first proposed, the authority members expressed significant concerns. The staff and consultants prepared a list of items that we thought should be addressed. Over the course of the past year, 27 items of concern were brought to the attention of the developers and the township. These items included: obtaining local geophysical information necessary for planning, design, placement and construction of retention and infiltration ponds; establishing a no blasting policy; limiting the use of fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides; and provisions for the water authority to participate in construction and post-construction monitoring. The developer and the township have included all of these requests in the plans. As a result, the water authority staff and board are much more comfortable with the development as planned and

believe that risk to the source water has been greatly reduced. A summary of the issues examined and addressed is available on the authority's website, www.scbwa.org.

The water authority's role is not to support, approve or deny land development projects. Our task is to provide clean, safe water. Any and all surface development and surface uses have the potential of contributing to groundwater pollution. Obviously, the more surface uses, from commercial and industrial to residential to transportation, the more chance there is for contamination. We don't know when or how much pressure will bring about that tipping point. The risk of groundwater pollution will be much greater if a coordinated and thorough assessment is not conducted prior to making a land use decision.

The water authority has agreed to meet with the Ferguson Township supervisors to discuss development as well as longer term water protection issues. The water authority, through its subcommittee concerned with source water protection, is available to meet with local land use officials to discuss water protection issues. The authority's website contains information about the system and a link to the water quality report. The authority's board meetings are held the third Thursday of each month and are open to the public.