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Bethlehem applying for Route 33 water service - Page 2

BETHLEHEM | The water war is on.

City officials are submitting a state application today to expand their water service area into the development-heavy Route 33 corridor in Bethlehem Township, an area currently served by Easton Suburban Water Authority.

Bethlehem has 15 million gallons in excess water capacity and can make money for the city through its sale, Mayor John Callahan said.

"We need to grow our customer base," he said.

Easton officials oppose Bethlehem's expansion because Easton Suburban has already spent millions of dollars building water lines in Bethlehem Township.

Easton Suburban Manager Roy White characterized Bethlehem's proposal as a "hostile takeover of customers" already served by the authority.

Easton Suburban has retained special legal counsel from Harrisburg to fight Bethlehem's PUC application, White said.

Easton Mayor Sal Panto Jr. said he discussed a compromise with Callahan whereby Easton Suburban would purchase bulk water from Bethlehem at the same rate it cost the authority to produce water.

Bethlehem rejected the proposal, Panto said.

"It's unfortunate when two Lehigh Valley municipalities get into a turf war," Panto said.

Callahan said potential water users in the Route 33 corridor – including St. Luke's Hospital & Health Network and the Field of Dreams complex – want to use Bethlehem's water.

"It's incumbent upon us to protect our interests," Callahan.

Bethlehem's application to the Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission also includes a request to expand water service into the Kreidersville section of Allen Township.

Under the proposal, the city would serve an under-construction residential development and a section of Kreidersville with failing wells, said David Brong, Bethlehem's director of water and sewer resources.

Between the Allen and Bethlehem townships expansions, the city would stand to make \$1.3 million annually, Brong said. The two areas would need about 650,000 gallons of water a day, he said.

In 2007, it was estimated it would cost Bethlehem about \$6 million in infrastructure upgrades to serve

Bethlehem Township's Route 33 corridor.

The city is also looking to expand water service inside its current service boundaries. To help attain that goal, the city has created a 16-page marketing brochure highlighting the advantages of Bethlehem's water.

The city's water -- twice voted the best tasting in the Lehigh Valley -- can be a draw for new businesses, Callahan said.

Callahan made Wednesday's water announcement at the Coca-Cola Bottling Co. of the Lehigh Valley, which touts Bethlehem's water in the city's water marketing brochure.

The company says it can use an alternative water treatment process because Bethlehem's water quality is so exceptional.

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