

Springfield Water & Sewer Commission

Executive Director Josh Schimmel Puts Focus on Accountability

Josh Schimmel was talking about the sophisticated — and generally underappreciated — system that brings potable water to tens of thousands of area homes, and takes wastewater from them, and decided he needed a little help to put things in perspective.

So he got up from his desk and retrieved some old photos he says are part of a huge collection that helps tell the remarkable story of how the Cobble Mountain Reservoir in Granville was constructed, as well as a system complete with roughly 1,000 miles of pipe that brings water 25 miles to the east to Springfield and host of surrounding communities, then collects, treats, and returns cleaned wastewater to the environment.

He then took *BusinessWest* to the conference room, which



Josh Schimmel

is decorated with a host of framed photos depicting the creation of the reservoir, the building of tunnels dug through the mountain to bring the water to Springfield, and even the Springfield Water Department's first truck, which arrived in 1906.

One of the pictures, dated 1909, shows a horse-drawn wagon carrying cast-iron pipe that would eventually run underneath the Connecticut River and bring water to homes and businesses on its east side. That pipe is still there and still in use, 108 years later, said Schimmel, executive director of the Springfield Water and Sewer Commission (SWSC), and that simple fact represents just one of the myriad challenges faced by this public utility he summed up in a brief and colorful way.

"When you flush your toilet, when you turn the faucet in your kitchen and get clean water from it ... that's a miracle," he said in a calm, understated tone that reflects a full understanding of what's represented by those old photos, adding

that, while it's not written down anywhere, his job description is essentially to maintain that miracle.

It's a job he's grown into after a quarter-century with the SWSC. He started as an operator at the wastewater treatment plant after earning a degree in Environmental Science at UMass Amherst, and eventually moved up the ranks, working in engineering, industrial pre-treatment, and then in a leadership capacity in Wastewater Operations, before becoming executive director in early 2016.

Mentored for many years by long-time SWSC Executive Director Joe Superneau, who passed away in 2012, Schimmel said his job comes down to carrying out what he called a delicate balancing act.

By that, he meant supplying water to a number of communities, including Springfield, Longmeadow, East Longmeadow, Ludlow, and Agawam, and taking and cleaning the wastewater from those communities and several others, and doing all that in an efficient, cost-effective manner for those customers — and maintaining that more-than-a-century-old system described earlier.

"We're stewards of the environment; we provide those critical public-health functions," he explained. "We provide clean water to several communities, and then we take wastewater back, clean it, and put it back into the Connecticut River, and we do it at a reasonable cost."

"We have an eye toward sustainable operation and investment," he went on. "We feel accountable for keeping our rate structure affordable to our customers."

As he talked about how he and his team of more than 250 employees carry out this broad assignment, and the philosophy they bring to the job, Schimmel said he is "a product of accountability" (he used that term early and often), and he demands the same from those working under him, because this is what the customers demand — and deserve.

"Our industry is heavily regulated, and staying in front of those regulations, while keeping things affordable for our rate-payers ... that balancing act is the struggle for all utilities," he explained. "We've gone to great lengths to sharpen our financial-planning skills and our capital-planning skills, and doing that has allowed us to have a fairly aggressive capital program to maintain our system and renew our system while also maintaining some of the lowest rates in New England."

One of the keys to carrying out this assignment is effective use of technology, he noted, adding that what was once a "picks and shovels business" is now defined by computer-modeled engineering projects, robots inspecting sewer systems, and other high-tech equipment.

Although he's looked at those photos in the conference room countless times, Schimmel told *BusinessWest*, he remains captivated by them, because of the story they tell and the manner in which they convey science, imagination, determination, and excellence.

These remain the words that define the SWSC as it carries out its mission — and maintains that miracle.

George O'Brien