

Water, Water, Everywhere...

By TERRY ELLIS

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The best minds of ancient Egypt, Palestine, Greece and Rome considered how to supply cities with water. More than 2,000 years later, the problem continues to engage our imagination. During the last 40 years, an estimated 10 trillion tons of water have been stored in reservoirs. And still we have a water problem. U.N. officials last year stressed that 1 billion people lack adequate clean water supplies.

“Water issues may be a contributing factor to breaking peace, like oil was in the past,” said Wally N’Dow, secretary-general for the 1996 U.N. Conference on Cities. N’Dow also pointed out that since the international debt crisis of the 1980s, lending practices have forced cutbacks in public funding for such things as water supply.

Even in the United States, which by comparison to other countries has virtually no water problem, cities and regions already go to court over water rights. In many older cities where water infrastructures were built at the turn of the century, public officials worry about aging pipes.

New York City epitomizes the issues many people face in varying degrees all over the world, as well as the resourcefulness and perseverance that people can bring to bear.

The city set out to build a new water tunnel in 1969. More than 25 years later, water finally is flowing in the first section of the new tunnel, although it’s still not being used while it’s monitored for quality.

What was conceived of as a five-year project was stalemated by inflation and funding problems, says Michael Abramson, a civil engineer with the city’s Department of Environmental Protection, who has been with the project since its inception.

“Time is a function of money,” said Abramson, who spoke from his office at the construction site in Queens.

Water for the city now comes from 19 upstate reservoirs and flows through Tunnel 1 and Tunnel 2, underground aqueducts painstakingly blasted out of rock, and completed in 1917 and 1936.

When water from the first 13-and-a-half miles of Tunnel 3 begins to flow through spigots, city water officials will breath easier. The new tunnel will supply as much water as the two original tunnels combined. Stage 2 of Tunnel 3’s construction is under way in earnest.

By the time Tunnel 3 is completed, the project — a monument to perseverance, determination and innovation — will have taken almost 50 years.

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