

Guest essay: Why raising awareness of city drinking water matters

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City drinking water is there any time you need or want it, at a faucet in your home, a public drinking fountain, in a glass on the lunch counter or restaurant table. You can fill your favorite container, and water will travel with you wherever you go at any time to satisfy your thirst and hydrate your healthy body.

Most obtain drinking water from a municipal water utility. In the City of Evanston, it is the Public Works Agency Water Production Bureau. Water is drawn from Lake Michigan, purified at the water plant at the lakefront on Lincoln Street, and distributed to businesses, institutions and residents in the city via a network of underground water mains or pipes. It’s remarkable that three gallons water is delivered to your faucet for about one penny.

How do you know that your municipal drinking water is safe? You can read the CCR (consumer confidence report). Each municipal water utility, including Evanston’s, is required by the Safe Drinking Water Act amendments of 1996 to annually produce a CCR and make it available to all water customers. Evanston’s annual CCR is available by the following May, and is posted on the city’s website. Just search for CCR and you will find it.

Perhaps you, like many people, have never heard of the CCR. Even though availability of the CCR is announced by the city in the May water bill, many recipients of a water bill don’t notice the announcement at the top of the page, where it states:

"The Consumer Confidence Report (CCR) is now available. This report contains important information about the source and quality of your drinking water throughout 2023. Go to: www.cityofevanston.org/2024waterreport to view the information. If you do not have access to the Internet, please call 3-1-1 (847-448-4311) and one will be mailed to you".

The city also announces the availability of the CCR in its electronic newsletter and distributes printed copies to various locations, such as, libraries, community and recreation centers, etc. Even so, many people, like condo and co-op owners, and renters, are not aware of the CCR because they don’t receive or pay a water bill. Although the city staff does what the US Environmental Protection Agency and the Illinois EPA require, the CCR does not universally come to the attention of those who need it most, water users. The US Congress may have intended the CCR for water customers, but they should have been thinking of people, the water users. Obviously, distribution of the CCR needs improvement.

Another needed improvement is the name of this report – Consumer Confidence Report. There is no indication that the report is about the quality of city drinking water. Perhaps Drinking Water Quality Report (DWQR) or Healthy City Water Report (HCWR) would be more appropriate. However, whatever name is selected, a catchy acronym would also help. An eighth grade naming contest may help find an appropriate name.

Public education about the safety of the municipal water supply is critical because there is a significant amount of distrust in the quality of city water. Three years ago two articles appeared in the Evanston RoundTable. On October 18, 2021, [this article](#) reported on people who distrust the quality of city water and who can't find such information. On October 25, 2021, [this article](#) brought out some cultural difficulties and apparent biases in communicating with various members of the community.

The alternative to city drinking water, water in plastic bottles or jugs, is more expensive and may not rise to the quality of city water. Water in plastic is not regulated by the Safe Drinking Water Act. Rather, it is regulated by the Food and Drug Administration under the Food, Drug and Cosmetic Act. City water is sampled and analyzed continuously in an EPA-certified laboratory. One never knows when water in plastic is analyzed or how long it sits on shelves in warehouses, stores or basements. Since most water in plastic comes from city water somewhere, it is probably safe. However, there is no CCR for bottled water.

Another 1996 Safe Drinking Water Act amendment requires each municipal water utility to have an approved Source Water Protection Plan. The plan will address protection of the city's water source, Lake Michigan. Evanston's plan was approved in January 2024. Since public education is an essential element of the plan, it will afford an opportunity for the city to improve the way in which it educates the public about the safety of city water.