Our view: Why 1983 mattered for Deschutes, Ballast Point announcements

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We've written a lot lately about how decisions made decades ago have led to the recent announcements that Deschutes Brewery, Ballast Point Brewery and the Eldor auto parts maker will locate in the Roanoke Valley. We've mentioned Botetourt County's acquisition of the Greenfield farm in 1995, Roanoke's assembly of the land for the Roanoke Centre for Industry and Technology in the early '80s.

Today, let's carbon-date some other important dates that lead directly to the Deschutes and Ballast Point announcements. The first is 1983. That was the year that a committee of valley government leaders recommended building a reservoir in western Roanoke County – what we know today as Spring Hollow.

Ballast Point

Spring Hollow will not be the water source for either Deschutes or Ballast Point — Carvins Cove will be — but the decision to build Spring Hollow factors in as a key one, anyway.

Roanoke County had been looking to develop a new water source since the 1970s, alternately looking at dams in Back Creek or Montgomery County, or pumping water from Smith Mountain Lake — eventually rejecting all of those as too expensive or too politically troublesome. Then came that 1983 committee recommendation.

By then, the county saw the need for a second big water supply as critical for economic development. Three years of controversy followed. One opponent warned that pumping water out of the Roanoke River into Spring Hollow would cause "the destruction of the Roanoke River as it is presently known." The public, though, was persuaded otherwise.

In 1986, Roanoke County voters overwhelmingly approved a $16 million bond referendum to build Spring Hollow. The reservoir opened in 1994. Five years later, the wisdom of that decision was borne out when a drought drained Carvins Cove so low that the foundations of some of the old buildings submerged under it became visible again.

Spring Hollow, though, had plenty of water.

The 1999 water crisis produced what The Roanoke Times called "an unprecedented water-sharing agreement" between the city and county. At the time the two localities sometimes acted more like rivals than neighbors, and the mere act of working out a deal to sell each other water in the middle of a drought was considered historic. "This is the most talked-about issue in the history of my 16 years in office,"

declared county supervisors chairman Bob Johnson.

The 1999 water crisis called attention to a deeper problem, though, quite literally. The city and county water systems weren't really connected. Oh, there were a few connections here or there, but not in a way that made large-scale water transfers possible. The two localities could now help each other out in a crisis, but it was still something of a patchwork solution. There was talk of what seemed both eminently practical but perhaps politically undoable: A single valleywide water distribution system. It took another, even worse, drought in 2002 – this one dropping Carvins Cove to its lowest levels in 55 years — to bring about the necessary political resolve.

Two years later, in 2004, the city and county created the Western Virginia Water Authority (Salem and Vinton opted to stick with their own water systems). In the 12 years since, the authority has laid more than 105,000 feet of water lines to more fully knit the systems together.

In 2009, Franklin County joined, and now water lines run all the way to Wirtz. There's also a separate network of lines around Westlake, which will someday be hooked up to the main system. Last year, the authority signed a deal with the Bedford Regional Water Authority to create a joint water treatment plant in Moneta, so both can pull water from Smith Mountain Lake and not have to build separate plants.

Also last year, Botetourt County voted to join; by December, Greenfield had a new source of water — just in time to be considered by Ballast Point. Twice in the recent past, the Roanoke Regional Partnership had shown beverage-making prospects sites in Greenfield; twice they had passed, citing concern over water. Greenfield had been served by wells, pumping out notoriously "hard" mineral-heavy water that required further treatment – 688 parts per million. The authority's water from Carvins Cove to Greenfield is quite soft — only 52 parts per million.

And because it's connected to a wider system — in a future drought, Spring Hollow water could easily be piped to Greenfield or anywhere else — it's far more reliable, another concern for any industrial user. "If you're going to make a large financial investment in a community to make a product whose main ingredient is water, you want to make sure that water is available," says authority spokeswoman Sarah Baumgardner.

There's also plenty of excess capacity built into the system now — both on the water supply end, as well as the wastewater end. Some municipalities are maxed out and charge extra for high-strength discharges that breweries produce; we're not and we don't — one of many reasons why the Roanoke Valley got the attention of these two breweries.

Big picture: In just 14 years, we've gone from having a water crisis — with restrictions imposed on water use — to having a water surplus that has now attracted not one but two high-profile employers.

Who should get the credit? Lots of people, over lots of years, far too many to mention. Don Flanders was the county administrator who helped make that initial recommendation for Spring Hollow in 1983. Or what about the Roanoke County voters in 1986 who agreed to pay for it? Or consider Elmer Hodge, the administrator who shepherded the project through. How about Ralph Smith? One highlight of his single term as Roanoke mayor from 2000-2004 was building better relations with Roanoke County, which paved the way for the water authority. Or how about Darlene Burcham and Elmer Hodge (again), who were city

manager and county administrator when the authority was negotiated? Or the city council members and county supervisors over the years who evolved from combatants into partners?

Or how about voters in multiple localities who have increasingly tended to elect local officials with a broader view than their predecessors once had?

Go toast yourselves. You don't need to wait for the beer; a glass of tap water will do.