Editorial: Good news in Moneta

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Today's editorial is dedicated to all of you who say there's never any good news in the paper.

This piece is chocked full of good news of the most remarkable kind: Government efficiency.

Unfortunately, there are three words we can't avoid that we know will cause some eyes to glaze over: Water treatment plant.

That sound you just heard was some of your fellow readers flipping over to the sports pages.

Today, the $14 million Smith Mountain Lake Water Treatment Plant opens in Moneta, pulling water from Smith Mountain Lake, treating it, and then sending it on to two different customers – the Bedford Regional Water Authority and the Western Virginia Water Authority.

This is not the first time lake water has been turned into drinking water. The High Point Water Treatment Plant near Moneta has been doing that since 1999, with that water also being split between the two authorities.

The difference here is one of scale. High Point has a maximum capacity of 1 million gallons a day; the Moneta plant triples that to 3 million gallons, and could be expanded to 6 million gallons as growth demands. There's also a matter of distance. Bedford's new lines will eventually pump some of the water as far away as Forest, on the outskirts of Lynchburg.

The real history for this project is a bureaucratic one: This marks the first time that two separate water authorities have joined together to build and operate a single water treatment facility.

Let's stop for a moment and let the import of that sink in. Those with long memories remember how localities in the Roanoke Valley used to fight each other with casual regularity. We don't just mean they argued back and forth. They went to court against each other. Some of that hostility was baked into the state code that allowed for, and even expected, cities to annex parts of counties. That meant Roanoke and Roanoke County spent a lot of time in the 1960s and 1970s in annexation lawsuits trying to redraw (or defend) their boundaries.

What an innocent time: Then we thought that our competition was on the other side of Peters Creek Road. Now we understand it's on the other side of the world.

Virginia finally imposed a moratorium on annexation in 1979, which created an environment that allowed suburban counties to cooperate with neighboring cities without fear that such cooperation would later be held against them in an annexation proceeding. Still, it took a long time for that cooperation to actually develop.

In 1999, there was a drought that drained Carvins Cove – the city's main water supply – dangerously low. Roanoke County, though, had plenty of water, thanks to its decision in 1986 to build the Spring Hollow Reservoir. One locality with plenty of water; its neighbor going dry. You'd think one could help the other, right? Wrong. The two basically had two separate water systems that didn't connect very well. It took another drought in 2002 – that one dropping Carvins Cove to its lowest levels in 55 years – that truly broke both the political and engineering impasse.

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 13 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. In 2015, Botetourt County joined.

Look at it this way: A little more than a decade ago, we had separate water systems that could barely work with one another – and politicians spent an inordinate amount of time arguing about water. Now, we have a regional water system that operates so efficiently it rarely makes the news. Moreover, that regional system is now cooperating with another regional authority to expand capacity and distribution.

In 1999, it was a big deal when Roanoke County agreed to supply water to Roanoke during a drought, and even then it took building some new connections to make the deal work. Now we take all that for granted, and we have the beginnings of an interconnected water distribution network that will run from the Roanoke Valley to Smith Mountain Lake – and then works with yet *another* network that runs from the lake to outskirts of Lynchburg. We say "beginnings" because the Western Virginia Water Authority's waterlines around the lake don't connect with the ones in the valley. There's about a six-mile gap that someday may be closed.

Still, look what all this has brought us: Jobs. The authority's infrastructure upgrades created an astonishing amount of capacity – and back-up supplies – that made the Roanoke Valley attractive to large-scale water customers. Roanoke wouldn't have won the Deschutes Brewery without the water authority. Botetourt County wouldn't have won the Ballast Point brewery without the water authority.

The people who eventually go to work there need to thank the politicians who made that possible – the Botetourt supervisors who voted in 2015 to extend the authority's lines to the Greenfield Center, the Roanoke and Roanoke County officials who first negotiated the authority back in 2004, and the Roanoke County voters who back in 1986 approved the bond issue that paid for Spring Hollow and expanded our water supply.

The people from Wirtz to Forest who will be drinking water that has come through the new Moneta plant should thank not only today's politicians, but also one particular politician from nearly five decades ago. In the 1960s, people considered Smith Mountain Lake as a potential water resource, and realized they couldn't. Roanoke, Salem and Vinton were all dumping raw sewage into the Roanoke River – and manufacturing plants dumped who-knows-what. In 1967, the head of the State Water Control Board said he didn't have the resources to "monitor this or any other stream." Then Linwood Holton was elected governor in 1969. He reorganized the state's nascent environmental

offices and started cleaning up the state's waterways, even if that meant threatening some polluters with criminal charges. History remembers Holton as Virginia's racial conciliation governor, but he was also Virginia's first real environmental governor.

When that lake water comes out of the tap today, raise a toast to Holton, too.