



## Cumberland's Century Celebration of Lake Gordon

**One of the most bitter political battles in Cumberland's history** happened more than 100 years ago when residents took opposing sides in an issue that prompted public demonstrations, the formation of a newspaper, and accusations against city officials. Reading about the hotly debated topic today would cause most residents to wonder what all the commotion was about since it involved a public health problem that everyone agreed needed to be addressed. Although there was a consensus about the problem, proposals to solve it became what one former councilman called "the biggest fight that Cumberland ever had." Few would suspect that the present day municipal water system that has faithfully served residents for a century experienced such a tumultuous beginning.

There was no doubt that Cumberland required an upgraded water and filtration system, as the nineteenth century drew to a close. The original municipal pumping station was constructed in 1871 along Greene Street, a location adjacent to the Potomac River. Pumps drew water from the river into a rudimentary system of pipes that supplied downtown Cumberland with basic water service but was incapable of servicing areas where the elevation exceeded 850 feet above sea level, neighborhoods that included parts of

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Washington Street, McNamee's Hill, and McKaig's Hill. The health of the Potomac River had also deteriorated over the first four decades of the waterworks' operation and became a growing concern.

Cumberland's water supply problems were addressed by the Board of Water Commissioners as far back as 1895 when Charles Latrobe of Baltimore, Maryland, prepared a report and analysis of possible sources of clean water. Latrobe's report, although apparently not acted upon by city officials, proved to be a major source of contention because one of his recommendations conflicted with later proposals and reports.

In 1908, a report and confidential letter prepared by J.G. Shriver, Cumberland's civil engineer, analyzed the municipal water supply problems and recommended solutions. One significant infrastructure weakness he identified involved the amount of water consumption per capita in the city. A survey of major water systems throughout the country revealed "that 50 gallons per capita per day is a liberal

estimate for all the needs and luxuries of well-to-do families in American cities.” Cumberland’s water supply was calculated to be more than 200 gallons per capita per day, an amount Mr. Shriver termed “simply outrageous,” thereby compounding the problems faced by the city officials who had to deal with leaky pipes. In addressing the primary problem of supplying clean water to residents, Mr. Shriver’s report succinctly ended with one sentence that offered three options: “So far as I can see, there are only three plans, by filtering the Potomac River water, by the artesian well system, and by going to Evitt’s Creek.”

In 1910, municipal health officials sounded another alarm when they concluded, “Our water supply has been of the worst. The city services as well as the wells and springs are badly contaminated.” Cumberland’s health officials recorded 565 cases of Typhoid Fever in 1910, a figure that caused the city to have one of the worst rates of the disease in the country. The contaminated water had infiltrated water mains and pipes within dwellings, thereby making it a pervasive and persistent problem.

In 1911, James Fuertes, a renowned hydraulic engineer residing in New York City, prepared an extensive report that concluded the three best sources of municipal water to be the Potomac River, Evitt’s Creek, and Savage River. While Mr. Shriver and Mr. Fuertes’ recommendations for potable water differed slightly both included Evitt’s Creek, a conclusion that contradicted Mr. Latrobe’s 1895 analysis which stated the stream’s water flow was insufficient to supply the needs of Cumberland’s population.

In May 1911, city officials accepted Mr. Fuertes’ report, voted to move forward on the Evitt’s Creek plan, and subsequently hired Mr. Fuertes as consulting engineer to complete the “engineering work in connection with the installation of the Evitt’s Creek supply.” His responsibilities also included supervision of construction work at the Pennsylvania dam site and the accompanying conduit line to Cumberland.

Selection of the Evitt’s Creek dam proposal required legislative action for two reasons. First, an Act of the Maryland Legislature authorized the city to levy an amount not to exceed \$10,000 to partially offset the construction costs associated with the massive project. Secondly, the act also addressed a provision in the law caused by the proposed dam’s location within Pennsylvania’s borders. It was not legally possible for the City of Cumberland to own land in Pennsylvania or take stock in a Commonwealth corporation. To comply with Pennsylvania’s laws, Cumberland was authorized to create the Evitt’s Creek Water Company, a Pennsylvania corporation under control of the Mayor of Cumberland and his nominees. The City of Cumberland acquired all the stock of the company, thereby removing legal impediments to the plan.

Cumberland Mayor George Young secured the services of local businessmen to serve on an Advisory Board of the Evitt’s Creek Water Company. In addition to its primary role of offering guidance on financing the project, the Advisory Board proved to be a strong advocate for the Evitt’s Creek plan in the face of considerable controversy.

With major legal and engineering matters concluded by the spring of 1911, the only obstacle remaining was a referendum on the impending levy. The referendum, publication of Mr. Fuertes recommendations, and growing opposition to building a dam in Pennsylvania quickly created an environment for a spirited civic debate.

The proposed location of the dam and waterworks, approximately nine miles north of Cumberland, divided the city into opposing camps. And as the May 11, 1912, referendum drew near, opponents of the city’s plan grew more numerous and vocal; their complaints ranged from the rational to scurrilous.

One of the primary reasons against the city’s proposal was the belief that Evitt’s Creek could not supply sufficient water; Mr. Latrobe’s 1895 report was offered as supporting evidence. The Potomac River also experienced low water during droughts but was less likely to run dry than the smaller stream, they argued. Furthermore, a modern filtration plant could be built for far less money than a dam located out-of-state. Supporters of the Potomac River plan included well known public figures: former Senator, George Wellington; former Congressman, Colonel George Pearre; architect, Wright Butler; and Justice Marcellus Martin.

The Pennsylvania option was particularly disagreeable to George Wellington who stated: “We won’t go to other states (for water).” Colonel Pearre concurred, “We all want pure water, but we want it from nature’s stream, the one in Maryland—the Potomac River.”

Another economic argument offered by opponents involved property taxes. It was charged that city tax rates would have to be increased because of the newly incurred debt, so landlords would likely raise their rents and hurt the “common people,” who according to Colonel Pearre’s estimate made up 95% of the city’s population.

Other critics argued that water pressure would be insufficient to service Cumberland if it originated in Pennsylvania because the gravity feed system would not provide for a sufficient drop in elevation.

Additional complaints included: the dangers of a failed dam, the health dangers of drinking stagnant water, the buildup of “scale” in steam boilers supplied by Evitt’s Creek water, and the use of Savage River as a preferred water source.

Numerous unfounded complaints were leveled by critics. One local attorney was rumored to have lined his pockets

by purchasing inexpensive property options from Pennsylvania and Maryland landowners that would later be transferred to the City of Cumberland for a handsome profit. It was also speculated that a local paper industry bribed influential individuals to promote the city's plan, so its waste products could continue to be dumped into the Potomac River.

Faced with growing opposition, proponents of the Evitt's Creek plan organized a campaign to present their case. The Advisory Board borrowed \$7,500 for the purpose of printing *The Independent*, a newspaper devoted exclusively to the water supply issue. According to Isaac Hirsch, board member, additional money had to be pledged by members who found that "running a newspaper was not an easy task."

An ally in the printed media was *The Evening Times* that devoted coverage and supporting editorials. In a methodical manner, John Avirett, the newspaper's editor, challenged the opposition.

Supporters also rented public venues, including the B&O YMCA Hall and the Maryland Theatre to rally their faithful. Mr. Fuertes, Thomas Footer, Albert Doub, and Tasker Lowndes were some of the city's prominent speakers. Open air meetings were held by both sides at multiple downtown locations. One public meeting, organized by the opposition, resulted in a situation where "pandemonium... ran riot—hands were pawing in the air," and John Avirett's presence was met with "language not fit to print."

The major organization supporting the city's plan was the Merchants and Manufacturer's Association which included most downtown businesses. Local ministers, the Women's Civic Club, lawyers, and doctors were also reported to be in favor.

Proponents of the Evitt's Creek plan noted that the economically disadvantaged citizens were hurt the most by polluted water since affluent citizens paid handsome sums of money to purchase bottled water. Medical treatment resulting from polluted water also placed a disproportionate burden on the poor who were most likely to be affected. Furthermore, economic advantages would be realized for everyone if the Evitt's Creek plan was approved because a new water system would cost less than alternative proposals and the benefits of pure water would likely attract new industries. Opponents, they argued, were misguided in their hopes the Potomac River would become clean in the near future. After all, the city had lost two court battles to stop upstream industrial pollution and was not likely to try litigation a third time.

According to *The Evening Times*, "there was not a dull moment" during the daylight hours of May 11<sup>th</sup> as both sides continued to publicly demonstrate. And as the 8:00 pm

hour arrived and votes were tabulated, the newspaper employees posted results in their office windows for the benefit of an excited crowd gathered on the sidewalk. After displaying a narrow 107 vote victory for the Evitt's Creek plan, "pandemonium broke loose. Someone built a large portable bulletin board bearing these words: 'We Won't Go to Hell by 107,'" an obvious reference to the margin of victory and an expression of a hyperbole.

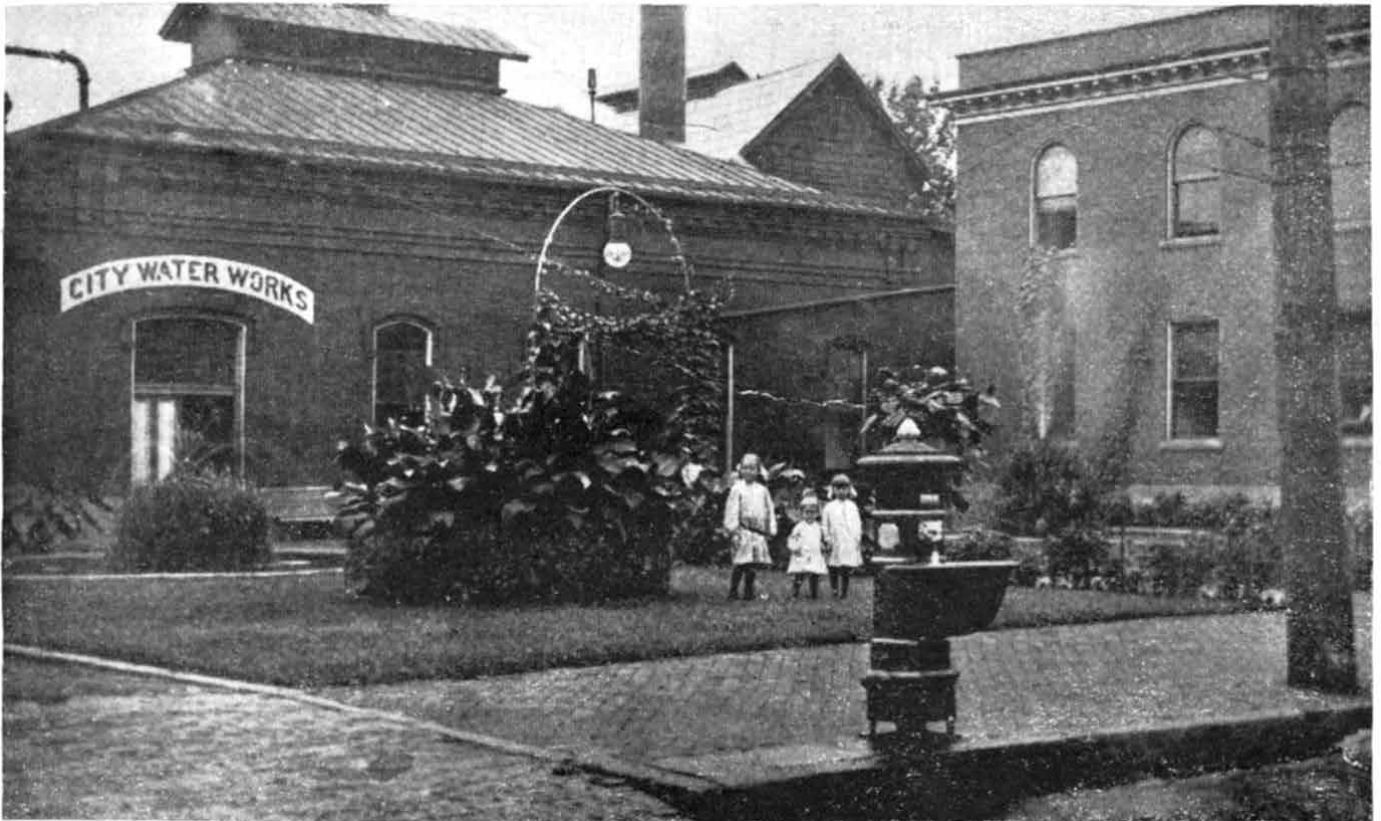
Some victors could hardly be called gracious, as they formed a group intent upon marching through the city in hopes of harassing opponents. *The Evening Times* account continued, "...the mob formed into some semblance of order, and ten abreast marched the streets of the city. The first house they visited was an opponent, Dr. J. Jones Wilson, who lived on Union Street. "They surrounded the house, threw up the windows and howled like a liberated pack of wild animals... Following the hundreds of people came several auto loads of men and ladies, each auto bore banners on which was printed an appropriate phrase." Patriot songs were played by bands and *John Brown's Body* was sung with substituted words. The celebrating continued long into the night.

### Construction of Lake Gordon

Following passage of the referendum, city officials turned their attention to the construction phase of the project and over the next 16 months a concerted effort was made to build a state-of-the-art water system. Officials were assisted by civic minded citizens who were determined that Cumberland be served by clean water from Evitt's Creek.

One local attorney had long anticipated the need for Evitt's Creek water and took preliminary legal steps to facilitate access to it. The unsung hero was Finley Hendrickson who in the summer of 1908 began the process of securing land and water rights from property owners in Maryland and Pennsylvania. His reasoning was that discussions about Evitt's Creek water would "inflate prices and cause the rejection of the stream." To avoid unnecessarily inflating land values, he acquired most options in 1909-1910, thereby clearing monetary and legal hurdles to the dam site before it was formally discussed. A 23 page report dated May 1911 and directed to the Mayor and Council specifically outlined the steps taken at his own expense and time. Mr. Hendrickson stated that three years worth of field trips using horse and buggy were required to option "the mills and lands at the best figure obtainable" and that he did not receive "commissions on the side or any other remuneration for myself or anyone." His motivation was "to secure a better water supply for the City, entirely free from any ulterior suggestion or influence."

Also noteworthy was Mr. Hendrickson's admission to property owners that their lands could possibly come under



## City Water Works, Cumberland, MD

In 1871, the original waterworks building was constructed in Cumberland between Greene Street and the Potomac River, near the bridge to Ridgeley. Power was supplied by a 70 horsepower water turbine that was used to turn an electrical generator, backwash pump, and compressor. In 1913, an addition was added to the building that allowed for the generation of electricity to city residents. On July 1, 1916, the city awarded a contract to Edison Electric Illuminating Company for electrical service, thereby removing the city from the business. Most of the original equipment remained in the building.

Most historical accounts of the original waterworks describe the system as lacking filtration capabilities. Mayor Shuck's 1887 "Report on the State of the City" calls that conclusion into question because it contained a reference that would suggest a system was in place: "There was built with said money a new conduit and filter at the waterworks, a work rendered necessary for the purification of our water supply." If a filtration system did exist, it was inadequate to meet the basic requirements of providing safe drinking water.

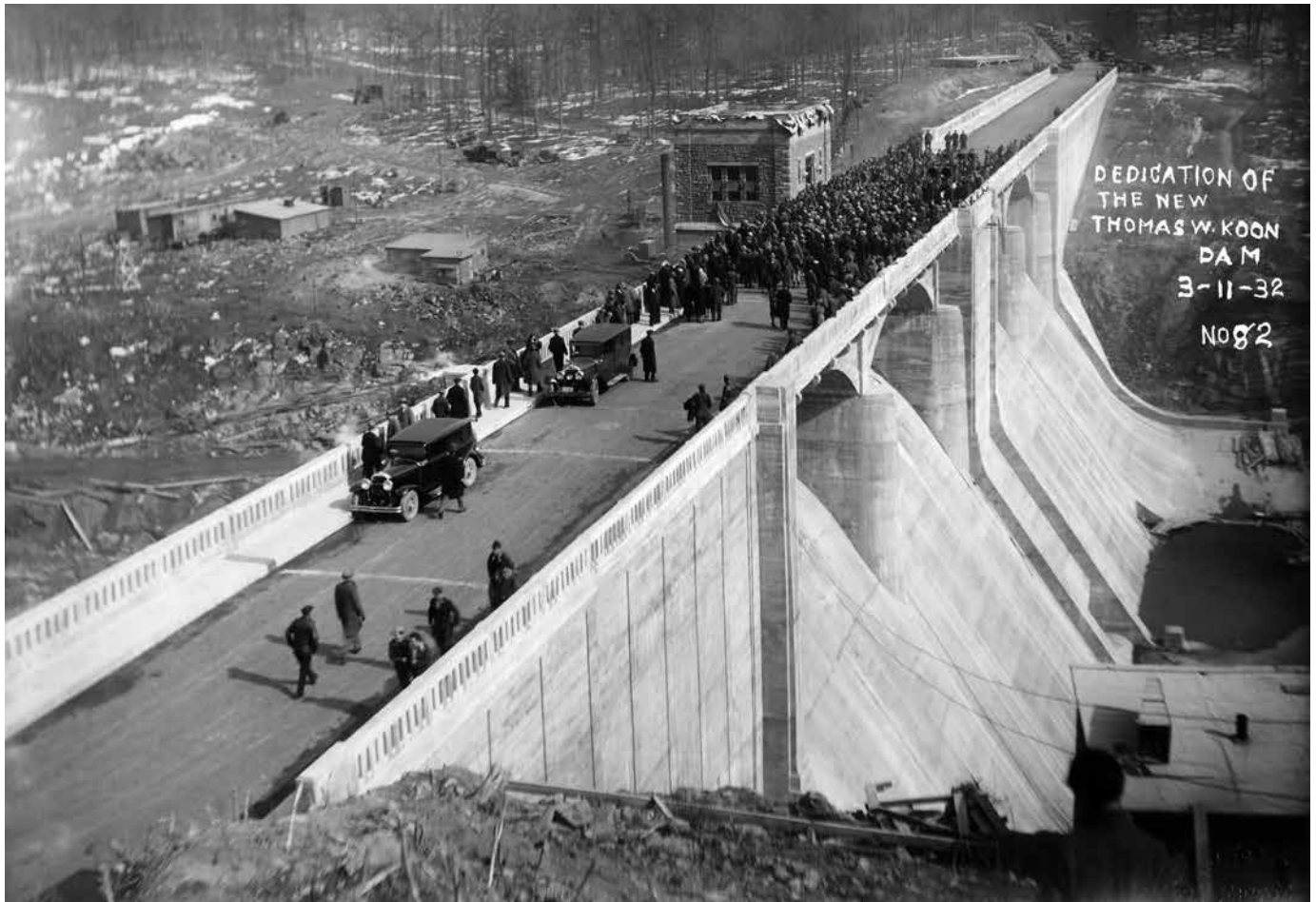
On December 19, 1916, city workers using open flame torches to carry out repairs in the basement accidentally set fire to the oil-soaked floor above them. The flames quickly spread and destroyed the building.

consideration for a municipal water project at a future date but that he was acting alone, assuming sole financial risks, refusing commissions, and trusting that city authorities would "give me reasonable compensation for my services." True to his word, Mr. Hendrickson later communicated to city authorities his intentions to "turn these options over to the City at the price he paid for (them)." Fortunately for Mr. Hendrickson, city officials did provide compensation for his civic services. His services were also appropriately remembered upon his death in 1940 when a Resolution of Respect was signed by members of the Evitt's Creek Water Company.

While Mr. Hendrickson worked quietly to acquire property and water rights, Robert H. Gordon, prominent Cumberland attorney and Evitt's Creek proponent, publicly campaigned for the Pennsylvania-Maryland stream. According to a contemporary report, Mr. Gordon had a "life ambition to see the city's use of the mountain water supply" years before the dam was built. City officials recognized Mr. Gordon's sustained efforts by naming the water impoundment in his honor.

Important to officials in 1912 was the engineering work associated with the dam, filtration, and transport systems. The gravity flow system required the selection of a site nearest to Cumberland where a large amount of water could be impounded that would provide sufficient pressure to supply Cumberland's residents. A reservoir site located between Evitt's and Will's Mountains was chosen for the lake.

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**A second impounding reservoir, called Lake Koon, was subsequently completed in 1932 and consisted of a 67 foot high dam that was 725 feet long across the valley. This photo was taken on the dedication day, March 11, 1932.**

Mr. Fuertes estimated costs for the dam and supporting infrastructure to be \$469,928; the bulk of funds were designated for construction work, supervision, and plan preparation. The low bid general contractor was Merrill-Ruckgarber Company from New York City.

Work on the dam proved to be seasonal and plagued by difficulties retaining laborers who objected to the tough conditions. Risks were highlighted in December 1912 when one worker was killed by a powder magazine explosion.

Over the next year and a half workers erected a dam wall that was 80 feet high in the middle and 450 feet long across the valley. The wall featured concrete construction faced with concrete blocks. The lake formed by the dam covered approximately 250 acres and held 1,500,000 gallons of fresh water that was collected from a 66 square mile drainage area.

The new system required that water be transferred from the lake into a filtration plant where it was treated by adding coagulation and bleaching solutions. After the impurities were allowed to settle, they passed through mechanical filters containing anthracite coal.

One step in the decision making process system proved to be a costly one. City officials decided (contrary to Mr. Fuertes recommendation) to purchase wooden pipes to carry water from the dam to Cumberland. According to Isaac Hirsh, Evitts Creek advisory board member and councilman, this decision was primarily an economic one because the wood-stave pipes were less expensive than cast iron models. A site visit to a town in Pennsylvania proved to be the final factor in their decision to move forward on the purchase. According to John DiFonzo, current city engineer, officials probably believed that because wooden pipes were used in other locations they would be successful in Allegany County. Unfortunately, the region's terrain, weather, and soil conditions proved to be unfavorable. "In particular, the wet and dry cycle caused the wood to dry out and quickly rot," noted Mr. DiFonzo who has observed many remnants of the old system over the years. "Today, we use 36 inch reinforced concrete pipe."

Progress on the dam was highly publicized in the local newspapers and created an aura of excitement. As the completion date drew closer, citizens began making journeys to the site to check on the progress for themselves. While



**Rodney Marvin, Water Plant Superintendent.**

inspecting the lake visitors often enjoyed a picnic lunch, thereby establishing a new picnic grounds that was utilized for decades.

After a series of brief delays during the summer, an announcement was made on September 15, 1913, that the plant was operational; that landmark date is recorded on the wall of today's filtration plant. Once fully functioning, the system delivered between eight and nine million gallons of water per day to the Fort Hill Reservoir. Clean water pouring into citizens' residences and businesses proved to be a blessing, as illnesses related to polluted water dropped sharply.

Albert Fowler, a chemist and bacteriologist from New York City, received appointment as the first superintendent of the new system. Mr. Fowler's credentials included an advanced degree from Brown University and work experience in the field of water purification.

Cumberland's water supply story did not end with the construction of Lake Gordon. Prosperity brought about in part because of clean water meant that Cumberland's population continued to grow. Census records supported the need for an enhanced water supply as the city grew from a population of 25,000 upon completion of Lake Gordon to nearly 38,000 in 1930 when officials once again looked to Evitt's Creek.

A second impounding reservoir, called Lake Koon (named in honor of Cumberland Mayor Thomas Koon), was subsequently completed in 1932 and consisted of a 67 foot high dam that was 725 feet long across the valley. The general contractor for the project was Vang Construction Company of Cumberland Maryland. Over time the City

of Cumberland assumed ownership of approximately 4,000 acres associated with the entire watershed.

According to Rodney Marvin, water plant superintendent, the municipal water supply system currently processes eight million gallons per day that is supplied through approximately 140 miles of water pipe. The filtration plant maintains its state-of-the-art status by utilizing a micro bubble clarification process that is highly effective in removing small particles from the water. While the dissolved air flotation system is new, the water also flows through coal and sand filters similar to the ones installed in 1913. Another constant at the plant is the 24/7 staffing by certified operators. Staff frequently hosts visitors from around the country and world who are interested in observing the treatment process at Lake Gordon.

John DiFonzo, city engineer, notes that today's municipal water system includes six water tanks that supplement the original Fort Hill Reservoir. According to Mr. DiFonzo, the city maintains 110 miles of water pipe within the city limits and nearly 30 miles outside the city. "Certain modifications were made over the years and today we have a good, strong system of water lines in Cumberland."



**Inside a part of the Cumberland Filtration Plant — a sparkling clean facility.**

Brian Grim, mayor of Cumberland, is appreciative of the water system and the benefits it continues to provide. "We are fortunate that 100 years ago officials and residents were forward looking in developing a better water system. Without access to clean water, the Queen City would not have prospered as it did. The water system and dams are the most important structures built by the city. As water

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**Lake Gordon** *continued from pg. 23*

becomes a more critical resource, the system will become more important to the region, so we want to plan and develop around it. In particular, residential development can be expanded because of our water resources. Clean water will make Cumberland and Western Maryland extremely important in the future.”

Important to the watershed’s future is the Evitt’s Creek Steering Committee, a volunteer group composed of individuals from Cumberland and Bedford County that focuses on reducing pollution and improving water quality at the lakes. According to Mr. DiFonzo, the group has been successful because they work together for common interests including maintaining water quality, fishing, boating, kayaking, and other recreation opportunities. The Pennsylvania Boat and Fish Commission, Cumberland officials, and anglers work closely to maintain the pristine waters of the two lakes. Mayor Grim is also working to ensure that both lakes are protected for a second century, as easements are being sought that will further protect the watershed from development.

A quality municipal water supply is often taken for granted. It seems the only time water draws attention is when problems arise or service fees are increased. The current year is an appropriate time to reflect on decisions that were made a century ago that greatly improved the quality of life and economic growth of county residents. Forward thinking residents undertook personal, political, and economic risks to bring the water system to fruition. The fact that clean water is taken for granted is a testament to the courage and success of those individuals who deserve a moment of respect and admiration.

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