



## **Nestlé water plant? Not in our town, Enumclaw says**

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By Ellen Benner

Last spring, in the small town of Enumclaw, a company came calling. What it wanted was water. One hundred million gallons a year, to be precise.

It would pay nicely for the privilege. It would set up a bottling plant and provide jobs for the people. If only somebody, somewhere in Enumclaw, would listen to what Nestlé Waters North America had to say.

But it was not to be.

Last month, without so much as a public hearing, Enumclaw sent a message to the multinational corporation: Go tap someone else's spring.

In the past several years, as the bottled-water industry has boomed, Nestlé has set up 26 plants in towns across the country, tapping into local springs. Enumclaw was its first shot at a Northwest plant.

It did not go well. As word spread of the proposal, residents unleashed a torrent of e-mails and letters to the local paper, concerned about a possible water shortage, the potential for invasive corporate control and the damage plastic bottles can do to the environment.

"This is such an incredibly bad idea, I can't believe that the city of Enumclaw would even consider such a thing," one area resident, Diane Hanes, wrote to the city administrator. "The residents of Enumclaw will not stand for this."

Nestlé Waters North America is a division of Switzerland-based Nestlé SA, the largest food-and-beverage company in the world. NWNA represents about a third of the American bottled-water market, through such brands as Arrowhead and Poland Spring, with about \$3.8 billion in annual sales.

David Palais, natural-resource manager for NWNA, said there were plenty of positive things the company could offer the community. But before he could get

into the details, the mayor recommended ending the discussion altogether — and the City Council, by a vote of 6-1, agreed.

"We're disappointed that we didn't have the opportunity to let the information speak for itself," Palais said.

### **Protesting on principle**

The company's proposal was this: Collect water from Boise Spring, one of four water sources for the city and surrounding area. Build a 250,000-square-foot bottling plant, possibly by the side of Highway 410 or tucked into an office park. Employ about 45 people.

And help the environment, company officials said. Currently, Nestlé Waters North America trucks its product up from California. A local plant would cut back on pollution.

Enumclaw Mayor John Wise was open to the idea. But as soon as he brought it to the City Council, he could hardly hear himself think above the din of public protest. As many as 10 phone calls or e-mails a day on the subject, for weeks on end.

"You need to know when to hold 'em, and when to fold 'em," Wise said. "It didn't stop, and it wasn't going to stop."

Nestlé could not have pitched at a worse time, some residents said. Gas prices are rocketing. Food prices are rising. Global warming is a growing concern. The proposal, they said, became a rallying cry for people who had suddenly realized resources were scarce.

By the city's calculations, if Nestlé took its share, starting in 2038, the system would not be able to serve new city customers. But underlying that concern were several others, from an expected increase in truck traffic through town to the company's business practices abroad.

And then there was the category of complaint that could be called "the principle of the thing."

That was a big one for Kara McKay, co-owner of Dick's Barber Shop, working her way around a teenager's head of hair one recent afternoon.

"I'm just so not for big corporations, since they're taking over the world," she said.

### **"Reason and research"**

The other day, on Enumclaw's main street, baskets of geraniums hung from lampposts. Bright-green benches lined the street blocks. This is the way Hillary Mitchell likes to see her town, a former farming community at the foot of Mount Rainier.

If Nestlé barged in, it would change the whole feel of the place, she said. Big-box stores have already made their mark elsewhere in South King County, on what used to be fertile farmland. She offered up Covington as evidence. Issaquah, in particular, got her goat.

"Way back when, it was darling," she said.

Enumclaw, population 11,200, is determined to stay on the small side of suburbia. A decade ago, limited sewage capacity led to a building moratorium in town. When the expanded plant opens later this year, the city is expected to grow slow and steady — maybe another 6,000 over the next two decades.

There are promising projects on the city's horizon: After years of lobbying for federal funds, an \$8 million "Welcome Center" is being built next year, with staff from the U.S. Park Service, the city's Chamber of Commerce and U.S. Forest Service as tenants. The city has already taken over the King County Fairgrounds, now known as the Enumclaw Expo Center, and a \$65 million regional hospital opens in a couple of years.

But like any other town, Enumclaw could use Nestlé's money. The city wants to build a community center. Schools need to be refurbished. Nestlé would pay \$250,000 a year for the water, plus property taxes on the \$40 to \$50 million plant.

Councilman Jeff Beckwith, for one, wanted to continue the discussion. An arborist with Puget Sound Energy, he pointed out the city's water supply would be limited in the future, whether Nestlé took its share or not — the only question was when. And Nestlé promised to work with the town to find other sources of water for the future.

All that talk about how the company would take the water equivalent of about 1,100 single-family homes — why, Beckwith wondered, was that necessarily a bad thing? It would keep the city's growth in check.

"In the end, we made a decision before we could get the facts," said Beckwith, who cast the council's lone dissenting vote.

Councilman Richard Elfers just wanted to do more research. A retired history teacher, he spent hours calling around trying to gauge the niceness of Nestlé as a neighbor. He only heard positive things in small towns from Maine to Texas, about how the company had boosted revenues, contributed to charities, provided

high-paying jobs.

But, he acknowledged, Nestlé gave him those phone numbers.

A small community in California has made national news for its fight against the building of a Nestlé bottling plant; officials agreed to the proposal, and afterward learned that residents of the struggling area were strongly divided over whether it should be built.

Regardless, Elfers was inclined to study the proposal further, if only the public outcry had not drowned out all "research and reason." In the end, he voted to reject Nestlé so the city could get back to its daily business.

### **Looking elsewhere**

For now, Nestlé has taken its show down the road to Orting.

There, Mayor Cheryl Temple is keeping an open mind. In her humble opinion, Enumclaw jumped the gun.

"I always believe that if someone comes to town to do business, we should at least give them the respect of letting them pitch to us, and see where we go from there," she said.

Her town of 6,000 needs all the jobs it can get. As for Nestlé sucking it dry, and staining its landscape, Temple is not having any of that. There are laws in place to prevent that from happening. And what's this resistance to the idea of a big corporation, as if the very word were dirty to say?

"Multinational?" she said. "Starbucks is multinational."

There are two of those in Orting. And one just down the road, in Enumclaw.

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