

Water supply not contaminated, city says

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The meters have a large pipe where the Detroit water enters. The pipe has a deliberate bottleneck so pressure is changed when water passes through. Pressure change is measured by a moving column of heavy, liquid mercury.

The Hills letter also reminds Detroit officials to investigate removal of mercury meters and to review maintenance operations "to prevent a recurrence of a spill not being reported or cleaned."

Although recent reports have placed mercury meter replacement costs at \$2,000 apiece, Biassell said the cost would be much higher.

"It's not just a question of changing a meter," he said. "It would involve changing the entire meter pit. They (Detroit officials) are not sure which alternatives are at this point. There may be nothing wrong with the meters. It could be just a maintenance problem."

IF DETROIT decides to change the water meters, the costs eventually will be felt by the users, Farmington Hills Mayor Jan Dolan said. Farmington Hills pays for water from Detroit and, in turn, passes on the costs to consumers, Dolan said.

Farmington Hills officials became alarmed just before Thanksgiving after Oakland County and Detroit officials tested samples taken from two water mains.

"The original samples (taken at 14 Mile and Farmington) came up high (in mercury content). And also the one at 14 and Halsted was somewhat high. At this particular point in time, we became concerned," Dolan said.

Following initial sample tests, officials of Farmington Hills, Detroit, Oakland County Department of Public Works and the county and state public health department met Dec. 5 to discuss the situation, Biassell said.

But it was discovered that the first batch of sample water was taken from the pit where the mercury had been exposed to the atmosphere — where it vaporizes and mixes with a chlorine substance. When samples were taken from the water system — far removed from the meter pits — "there was no problem." The problem was the sampling technique. "The sample was being contaminated," Biassell said.

FINALLY, STATE Department of Public Health officials took samples

of water from commercial and residential areas in the city's seven water supply districts. The state public health's laboratory is the only one in Michigan certified by the federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to conduct this type of test, Biassell said.

"The results came in (Dec. 9) Monday morning. There was no mercury found in the water," Biassell said.

A letter from Richard Lehner, district engineer for the state public health department, confirmed Biassell's report of the test's findings.

"Mercury was not detected in any of the samples... results were well below the allowable maximum contaminant level of two parts per billion of the state drinking water standards established by the Michigan Safe Drinking Water Act," according to Lehner's report. State Act 399 was legislated in 1976.

IN THE first incident, mercury was discovered in a water pressure reduction valve near 14 Mile and Halsted on Nov. 20, according to Lehner. Oakland County public service workers found eight pounds of mercury, about a cupful, in the valve downstream from a master meter while conducting routine maintenance, according to Biassell and information from Edward O'Rourke, administrator for environmental health services for the county health department.

The county is responsible for maintenance on the valves, which Williams said caused most of the local problem. "We (City of Detroit) had to continually shut off our meters because the pressure reducing valve was not working correctly," he said.

Detroit water approaches Farmington Hills at a high-pressure rate of 150 pounds per square inch. A reduction valve slows the water to a usable pressure of 80 pounds per square inch.

Detroit and state officials said the cause of the mercury leak in the reduction valve was probably due to a surge of pressure in the water flow, forcing the liquid mercury to spill out of a pipe in the meter. The loose mercury in the reduction valve was recovered with a hypodermic because it is impossible to pick up, Biassell said.

THE SECOND incident involved corrosion in a water meter housing line at 14 mile and Farmington Road, Lehner said. Puddles of mercury were discovered on the meter pit by city of Detroit water department workers, Biassell said. Detroit is responsible for meter

maintenance.

Mercury is a naturally corrosive element and probably caused the line leakage, Lehner added, requiring only "routine maintenance" by the city.

Neither Biassell or Williams could say how the mercury puddles appeared on the pit room floor. Biassell said more

than likely, the mercury on the floor was due to sloppy workmanship. Lehner said the puddles were most likely caused by a leak in the faulty line.

Williams said he was "unaware" of a meter maintenance problem at that location.

BECAUSE THE problems appeared to be isolated, Lehner said no other community water was tested. The main meter serving the Farmington water system is a mechanical one and does not use mercury, according to Farmington City Manager Robert Deadman. O'Rourke explained the difference

between elemental mercury — used in the water meters — and mercury-based compounds posing a health risk. "Elemental mercury is insoluble in water and is heavy," he said. "Mercuric compounds carry a health risk if ingested... elemental mercury would not be a problem."

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The Department of Special Services, Recreation Division is bringing Santa Claus to town. Your child can receive a personal call from the Jolly Man from the North Pole by filling out a North Pole Hotline form that is available at the Recreation office, Farmington Hills City Hall, Farmington Library and the Farmington Hills Library.

The completed form should then be mailed to the Recreation office, 31555 11 Mile Road or dropped off at Santa's mailboxes, in front of the Chamber of Commerce, 33201 Grand River or inside of Tally Hall, 31005 Orchard Lake Road by Monday, Dec. 16.

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For further information, call 474-8115, Ext. 250, and ask Santa's helpers between 8:30 a.m. and 4:30 p.m.

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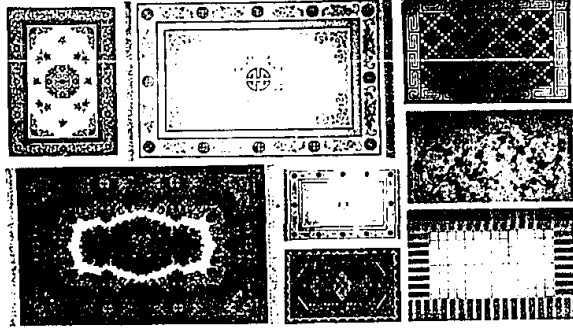
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