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Madison Twp. resident takes over as Lake County sanitary engineer

Randy Rothlisberger is proud the Lake County Utilities Department is able to treat wastewater and offer clean drinking water to around 40,000 customers all for less than a penny a gallon.



Randy Rothlisberger, Lake County engineer, discusses maintenance at the Aquaria Water Treatment Plant in Willoughby, where filters are being replaced in the filter room. Video of Rothlisberger at www.News-Herald.com

That level of service is one of the goals the Madison Township resident wants to continue as he was tapped by county commissioners on April 6 to be the county's new sanitary engineer.

Rothlisberger, 48, replaces Al Saari who had served in the position for the past 30 years until he retired at the end of March.

"Al was great to work with for 17 years," Rothlisberger said. "He was a great person to learn from. Thirty years with us and 10 to 15 years on the private side before he came to the county."

The new sanitary engineer started with the Utilities Department in 1998 doing construction inspection work for about seven to eight years.

Rothlisberger then became more involved in the planning process and took over as the county's director of

water in 2011 — the position he served until his promotion to sanitary engineer.

Work as water director got him more familiar with how the county's water system operated and provided an opportunity to meet and work with the men and women in the field.

"It was a great experience and all of our employees do a super job and it has helped me to see the picture from beginning to end," Rothlisberger said.

The biggest challenge of his new job is to make sure enough of the pipes are replaced each year to keep up with the aging infrastructure, he said.

"We're fortunate in Lake County," Rothlisberger said. "The western part of the county was developed in the '40s and '50s and Mentor and to the east was in the '70s and '80s. So our pipe is just getting to be 60 to 70 years old on the west end and 50 to 60 on the east end."

He said that level of age is about the design life of those pipes.

"We're certainly not in a critical state of replacement of pipes. Some communities in the United States are way beyond that and behind," Rothlisberger said. "Our goal is to get out in front of that and replace the pipes as they age instead of trying to replace breaking pipes."

The Utilities Department spends a lot of time ensuring that the water and sewer systems work properly.

One of the projects already taking place is the replacement of the filter media at Aquarius Water Plant in Willoughby.

The filter media is a material that comprises a layer of sand and includes a layer of a type of coal and it is the first replacement of it since the plant went online in 1985.

This type of filter is the last thing water goes through before it goes into the department's wells and then out to customers' faucets.

"We do replacement projects annually, including this filter project at the plant," Rothlisberger said during an interview at the Aquarius plant.

"We want to stay up to date and don't want things to deteriorate."

In the last decade, economic development rapidly occurred in places where water and sewer infrastructure wasn't in place for many areas served by the county system.

That development has tailed off, so expanding the infrastructure has become less of a priority, and now the focus is more on maintaining what is in place, Rothlisberger said.

"The county is evolving. When Al was sanitary engineer there was rapid expansion. We expanded our treatment plant in Mentor four different times, (Aquarius) was a brand new plant when he started and went online in 1985," he said. "It's a different era, so over the next 20 to 30 years it's maintaining the system. I think I'm more faced with making things last and maintaining it."

Another part of his job is the county operates the Solid Waste Facility in Painesville Township.

"We have about five more years of permitted area to place the waste. We're working on another permit to expand the cell for the next 15 to 20 years," Rothlisberger said. "There is a lot of planning people might not be aware of."

These services help make the county an attractive place for businesses to operate, he said.

"We have affordable sewer, affordable water," Rothlisberger said.

"When you talk Northeast Ohio and Lake Erie, the advantages here are very obvious."

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