

Midway City is an oasis amid drought



Bruce Strong/The Orange County Register

Harold Duvall of Westminster manages the smallest of Midway City's three water companies, South Midway City Mutual Water Co.

70-year-old source alive and well

Cheap water abounds

By Robert Frank
The Orange County Register

MIDWAY CITY — This tiny, little-known place has something better than ocean views and nice neighborhoods.

It has water. And it's cheap. The supply seems to burble endlessly from private, community-owned wells, just as it has for the past 70 years for many in parts of this unincorporated area.

This water-rich oasis in the middle of drought-stricken Orange County faces no mandatory cutbacks or penalty assessments,

no restrictions on washing cars, watering lawns or showering.

In fact, Midway City's 7,000 residents don't even have water meters at their houses.

"Midway City is among very few places in Southern California that are not affected by the Metropolitan Water District cutbacks," said Jim Van Haun, spokesman for the Orange County Water District, the agency that manages the county's supply of underground water.

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Upkeep is just 'pitchin' in'

The Register

When Jim Wall wants to know how things are flowing in his water district, all he has to do is lie in his bed and listen.

"I can tell by the sound of the pipes in the wall if the pump is running or not," said Wall, a trustee for the Midway City Mutual Water Co.

If there's a problem, Wall rolls up his sleeves and runs across the street to the water district's headquarters — a single well on Madi-

son Avenue that has been pumping water since 1926.

Wall and other trustees of Midway City's three independent mutual water associations found themselves running their neighborhood water works in their spare time.

When a water main breaks, or if a pump suddenly stops at 3 a.m., no work crews are available to fix the problem. Like volunteer firefighters, water-association trustees roll up their sleeves, grab shovels and dig up the street themselves.

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WATER: Midway City supply cheap, plentiful amid drought

FROM 1

Midway City, founded in 1922, comprises about 200 acres accessible from Beach Boulevard between Hazard and McFadden avenues. Westminster surrounds three of the unconnected Midway City islands and wraps three-quarters of the way around the fourth island, which also touches Huntington Beach.

Santa Ana River water flowing about 125 feet underground is tapped by Midway's three private water companies — Eastside Water Association, Midway City Mutual Water Co. and the South Midway City Mutual Water Co.. These companies have served the area since it was covered with sugar beet and lima bean farms.

The one- and two-well operations are owned by groups of property owners — called shareholders — who select boards of directors from their ranks to maintain the wells, process bills, test for bacteria and keep the companies running.

Run as part-time jobs by trustees who are either retired, wrangled into the task, or both, all three districts have asked their shareholders not to waste water in the event of a shortage in the underground water table.

The Eastside Water Association is the largest of the three, with more than 400 shareholders who pay \$12 a month and are served by a single well. Eastside pumped 250.3 acre feet of water in 1990, or roughly 81.7 million gallons. That would fill the 5 million-gallon Shamu Stadium at Sea World more than 16 times.

Midway City Mutual Water Co. has about 300 shareholders who pay \$17.50 a month. Last year, Midway Mutual pumped about 56.8 million gallons.

South Midway City Mutual Water Co. is the smallest, with 67 shareholders who pay \$9.16 per month. The company's two wells in 1990 pumped 29.6 million gallons.

For the flat monthly fee — anywhere from \$4 to \$15 less than what their neighbors pay — the shareholders get as much water as they can use.

By comparison, people who live in portions of Midway City receive

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ing water from the city of Westminster pay about \$25 a month, depending on how much is used. Huntington Beach residents pay about \$22 a month.

The average person uses 210 gallons of water daily, water company representatives said.

The wells are the legacy of Midway City's founding farmers, who picked the name "Mid-way" for their village because it was approximately halfway on the wagon route between Santa Ana and Anaheim Bay, just west of the Santa Ana River's meandering banks.

Wagon drivers picking up cargo from barges moored in Anaheim Bay would stop in Midway City to water their horses. Farmers dug wells to irrigate crops and provide potable water for their families and neighbors.

As houses and streets were built, property owners simply would ask if they could be hooked up to the nearest well.

"This place grew up like topsy around the people who were here," said Joe McCracken, Eastside's manager.

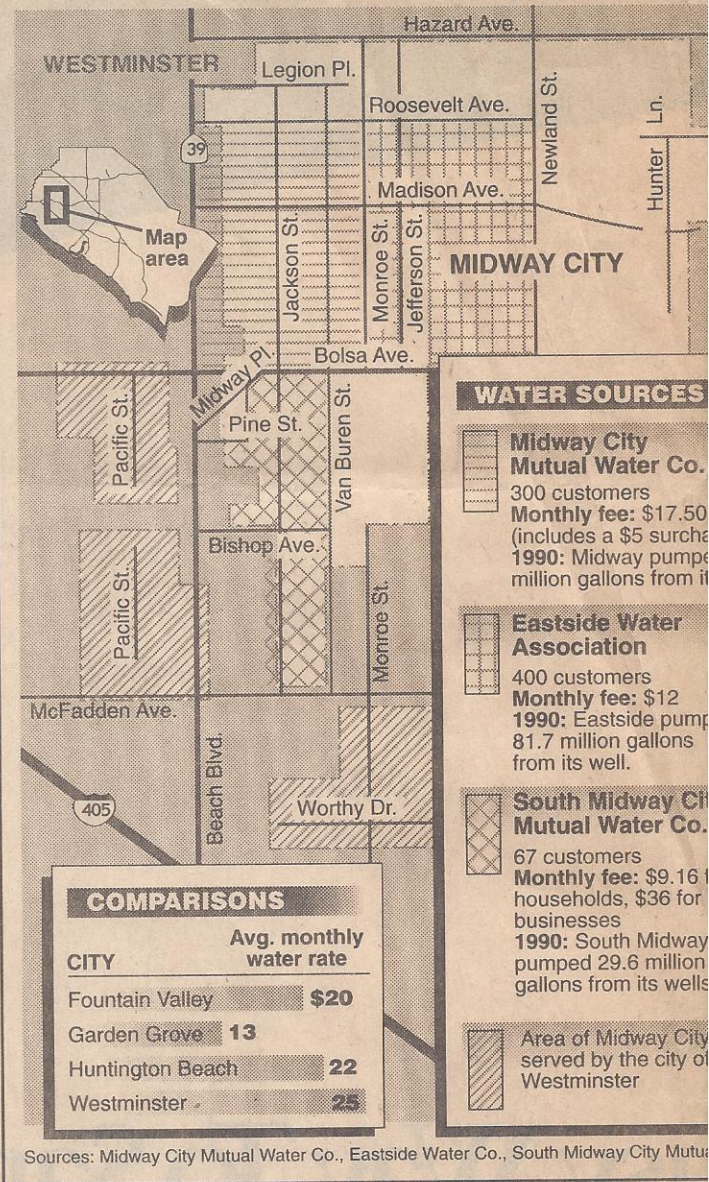
Although there seems little to worry about now, representatives from all three districts say they are concerned about the state's decision to slash by 90 percent the amount of water sold to the Orange County Water District to replenish underground water sucked out by wells.

Over time, the level of underground water could dip low enough for sea water to seep into the system, affecting the water districts that rely completely on ground water, McCracken said.

If the districts were forced to

Water, water everywhere

Roughly half of Midway City is a rare oasis in the middle of the drought. Santa Ana River water flowing underground is tapped by Midway's private water companies. Customers of the companies pay a flat fee for all the water they want. And with no water meters, there is no way to measure usage for cutbacks.



Sources: Midway City Mutual Water Co., Eastside Water Co., South Midway City Mutual Water Co.

The Orange County

adopt a water-conservation plan, it would be impossible to separate water wasters from water savers. None of the shareholder-customers have water meters — the only meters are attached to the wells.

The shareholder-customers include single family homes, apartment complexes and small manufacturing companies, so water demands vary widely.

But the Midway City customers don't appear to abuse their now-plentiful water supply. All three water companies reported that

they drew a few thousand feet less water between December than in the same month period in 1989.

Marilyn Smith, who lives in Eastside's service area, said she has been saving water about four years. She has saved washing machine dishes by hand only two weeks and saves water with a cactus collection.

"You know, I don't even remember," she said. "I only do it because I know I have to."

KEEP: District managers in wells in their spare time

DM 1

"Obviously, if anything goes to hell we're all going to know it because the water quits and the phone starts ringing," said Joe McCracken, trustee for the East-side Water Association, the largest of the three private community water works.

McCracken, 68, a retired oil-field mechanic, said his duties as a trustee include letting new homeowners know that they are buying a portion of the community-run well when they buy a house in the district.

"We take turns every week," he said. "The only reward I get out of this is I know I'm getting the best water I can get."

Harold Duvall, a Georgia-born Westminster resident, said he spent years pitching in at the South Midway City Mutual Water Co. because it was next door to his Midway City cement factory. That

made him a natural choice to manage the district when the former manager moved out of town.

When Duvall sold his factory in 1980 — after 33 years — other district customers asked him to keep the district running.

"I'd been pitchin' in for about 10, 12 years before that," said Duvall, who said his age is a secret. "Every time something'd go wrong, the guy that was runnin' it would yell 'Hey Harold, grab a guy and go take care of the water!'"

"I told 'em 'I'm retired' ... But they told me, 'Either you take over or we're going to lose the water company,'" Duvall said. "So it's like a dedication to the district because I own property over there."

District trustees agreed on the advantages of keeping the district's independent: flat rates and pure water.

— Robert Frank/The Register