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Desert town's lone water man stays on the go to maintain flow

Calvin Louie, manager of Cabazon's tiny district, endures snakes in the mail, metal thieves and scofflaws from a cramped office. But new quarters are in the works.

January 05, 2009 | David Kelly

Not long ago, an irate customer expressed his displeasure with the tiny Cabazon Water District by dropping a live rattlesnake through the mail slot.

"It was pretty good size, too, slithered right under the desk," said R.D. Cash, president of the water board.



A thick pane of glass, dubbed "the rattle trap," was swiftly installed over the slot to prevent any further reptile deliveries.

"No matter what you do, you'll always have irate customers," Cash said.

Snakes in the mail are just one of the perils faced by the water district, housed in an old fruit stand along Main Street.

Thousands of dollars of equipment have been stolen, vandalism has been rife, and business is conducted from behind a barred, bulletproof window.

The quarters are laughably cramped, and staffing is exceptionally light.

"I'm it," said water district manager Calvin Louie, a former police officer and the sole full-time employee. "I'm a one-man band. And if I don't do my job, it's kind of noticeable. People turn on their water and nothing comes out."

For more than half a century, the Cabazon Water District has persevered on a shoestring budget, managing by sheer grit to provide water to this hardscrabble, unincorporated community of 2,300 and a few life-sized dinosaurs near Palm Springs.

But a change is coming, one that will likely signal the end of an era.

A roomy \$1.4-million, climate-controlled building, funded by Riverside County, is expected to go up in the next few years, replacing the current 800-square-foot office.

"The water district has been a master of innovation," said Andy Frost, a regional manager with the Riverside County Economic Development Agency. "But the old place is simply inadequate."

The 54-year-old block of beige stucco has hardly aged gracefully. The ceilings are low, the carpets tattered and stained. It's so small that hundreds of people have to line up outside each month to pay their bill at the window.

"It's easier to bring it in rather than mail it," said Randy Miller, 53, as he waited at the window in the blustery wind. "It's sort of a gathering place, and after a while you feel like you know the people."

The new facility will have an actual lobby so folks like Miller won't freeze in winter or melt in summer. But it won't come with any additional staff, at least not right away, so Louie expects to continue his extremely hands-on management style.

That means personally checking the pressure and water levels all over town at 5:30 p.m., 9 p.m., midnight and often 4:30 a.m. every day. It means answering emergency calls 24 hours a day. And it means dealing with crime and antiquated equipment.

"When I first got here, you had to shut down the entire town to fix a leak," said Louie, hopping into a truck with Cash and heading out to check some underground pipes.

When he arrived, he lifted a heavy metal grate in the road and climbed down into a concrete bunker full of blue pipes and black widow spiders. He keeps the keys with him at all times in case the door slams shut.

"In a normal water district, this is all done on a laptop computer, but I have to do it manually," he said, fiddling with a pressure gauge.

If he didn't, he said, bad things could happen. Excess pressure once burst pipes and fixtures all over town. On two occasions, overflowing tanks turned roads into rivers.

"That was B.C.," said Louie, 49, adjusting his white cowboy hat. "Before Calvin."

The former UCLA police officer and security manager for Desert Premium Outlets in Cabazon has been manager for four years. And few can doubt his commitment.

He rides his horse into the San Jacinto Mountains to inspect water tanks in his off hours.

He endures a closet-sized office and manages a staff of four part-time employees. In winter, flooding turns the back lot into a virtual lake. In summer, two small air-conditioning units struggle to keep the office cool.

Then there is the crime. Over the last few years, the district has lost \$20,000 worth of equipment to vandalism and metal theft. Once, the entire back end of a truck was stolen, leaving only nuts and bolts. Thieves are even filling trucks with water stolen from hydrants.

On top of this, the district's revenue has dropped 28% in the last year because of housing foreclosures.

Despite the challenges, Louie seems to relish the edginess of the job.

Moments after checking the pipes and emerging from the bunker, his cellphone rang, and he immediately tensed up.

"Water theft in progress," he announced.

He and Cash drove to a ramshackle house surrounded by trash-strewn lots. Louie had shut off the water earlier for nonpayment, but it had been reconnected with a washing-machine hose.

He brushed past a barking dog and made for the door. The owners were gone, so he grabbed a wrench.

"I'm going to shut it off again, and if they reconnect it I'll file a complaint with the sheriff's office," he said in a calm but stern voice.

Cash watched from the sidewalk.

"Calvin has a law enforcement background," he said with genuine admiration. "He has the huevos to do stuff like this."

Louie turned off the water and held up the hose like a trophy.

"You probably ought to keep that as evidence," Cash said.

Later on, back at the office, Louie was asked if it might be better for a larger, better-funded water agency to take over operations.

He wouldn't hear of it.

"They could repair the infrastructure, but they would want to recoup their cost through the consumers," he said. "The water district has been the hub of the community for years, and for that reason we think it should stay in business."

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