

New Water Treatment System Provides Abundant Water and Sparks Economic Development

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Thomasville, Alabama



Thomasville, Alabama, bought its drinking water from Pine Hill. The little town, with a population of a little more than 4,200 people, relied solely upon this drinking water supply and did not have a back up source. Because the source was so limited, Thomasville was frequently forced to implement water restrictions, even during the winter months. On more than one occasion, they had to endure week-long water outages.

“We had to go to sleep on a lot of nights wondering if we were going to have water the next morning,” said Sheldon Day, mayor of Thomasville. “There was not one water system within a 100-mile radius of us to connect to. And the source we had was stretched to capacity.”

Economy Needs A Spark

Without a dependable source of drinking water, Thomasville’s economic growth would be impossible, especially with water restrictions occurring more frequently. Local jobs were few and far between. Thomasville citizens did not see that changing anytime soon.

“Wilcox County is the poorest county in Alabama and in the top 15 poorest counties in the nation,” said Day. “A lot of impoverished people live in this area. We always say that when a recession comes, we don’t know it because nothing much changes here. We knew if we did not do something, we wouldn’t be able to attract industry to our community.”

Day and other Thomasville leaders decided they needed to do something about the drinking water situation that the town faced.

“When things were good, we were doing OK,” said Day. “But when things were bad, they were terrible.” That’s when they decided they needed an aggressive plan to create an abundant drinking water source and drive economic development for the town.

All the Way from the River

The plan centered on the Alabama River, which was a good 20 miles away from Thomasville. Day knew that the proposal was going to be pricey. The system would cost \$30 million to build. But it would eliminate the need to buy drinking water.

The system ran a 20-inch pipe from the river to the new drinking water treatment system. “The uniqueness of this system is that it’s one the largest U.S. Department of Agricultural (USDA) projects in the history of the state and one of the longest pipelines ever, pumping raw water for 19 miles,” said Day.

Day said he realized early on that the town would need to develop partnerships to get the job done. So they reached out to USDA Rural Development in Alabama and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

“No one agency had the ability to help us so we got all these federal agencies to hold hands,” said Day.

It Took a Partnership

It took several years for the partnerships to develop and meet their goal of building the new water system. In 2009, Thomasville was awarded a \$4.83 million grant and \$10.369 million loan from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. In 2011, Rural Development awarded an additional \$1.5 million grant and \$3.5 million loan. EPA awarded them a \$4.696 million grant.

To date, USDA Rural Development Alabama has invested \$20.2 million, making the Thomasville water project the largest USDA has ever financed in the state.

The new water system helps Thomasville drive the economy in a 15-mile radius.

“We did not want to have to worry about water again,” said Day. “When you run out, it takes days to recover. There were times when we had to call the governor to get water trucked in



for nursing homes and other critical business. Now the residents can say, 'If I need to use a little more water I can use it,' and they don't have to feel guilty.

"Just by adding the new water plant and people knowing they can use more water now, our water use is up 20 percent from what it was before," he explained. "We designed the system for future growth.

"Over the last four or five years we've attracted more than \$700 million in capital investment and 1,500 new jobs," Day continued. "Housing and construction have grown because we have new people moving in. We have numerous industry, retail, and hotel jobs opening up. We have vast timber regions—we are one of the highest producing timber regions in the country."

Finally, a Reliable Source

The state-of-the-art water treatment plant built in Thomasville provides a reliable supply of clean safe drinking water and has been the largest contributor to the economic growth that the town has ever seen.

"It has taken away a lot of anxiety that I have as mayor and water superintendent," said Day.

The new system sparked economic growth for the town, but it came with a slight rate increase.

"We did have to raise rates a little, but we raised them slowly over a two or three-year process so it wouldn't effect people all at once," Day said. "Our rates are about four to five percent above average but we're still close to the typical water rate."

Growth Will Continue

Day said that the town has projected it will need to build more than 200 new housing units within the next five to seven years. And seeing such a growth spurt makes him proud he was part bringing clean, safe drinking water to community and helping Thomasville become the town it was meant to be.

For more information about the Thomasville, go to <http://www.thomasvilleal.com>. You can contact Sheldon Day at 334-636-5827, or email him at sday@thomasvilleal.com



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