

Texas Rural Water Association: Awards Committee

System-wide Awards Nomination for, *Dripping Springs Water Supply Corporation*

Submitted February 3, 2020 Written by: Rick Broun

Without any hesitation, one of the greatest contributions to 1964 was not only the unveiling of the revolutionary Ford Mustang at the World's Fair, but also the launch of our small-town non-profit water utility, Dripping Springs Water Supply Corporation (DSWSC). Located in the tranquil foothills of the Texas Hill Country, we proudly proclaim fifty-five years of commitment and service to the Dripping Springs community. Our knowledgeable and dedicated staff members have meticulously transformed our once "sleepy" system into an aerodynamic fire-breathing pony car, providing lightning fast customer service and thunderous subterranean pumps producing ample amounts of water all under the checkered flag of regulatory compliance. Though our beginnings were humble, serving a few hundred water connections annually, due to tremendous population and commercial growth in the last decade and a half, we now serve water to thousands of water connections every day. Along with a booming Texas economy, a roaring demand for water in western Hays County has become our focus. Faced with this challenge, DSWSC took hold of the wheel and expanded our services and developed our infrastructure to meet the thirsty needs of our existing and new members. We feel confident that DSWSC is in the pole position at present, but we fervently acknowledge that our responsibility to our members continually pushes the finish line beyond our line of sight as we navigate collectively towards tomorrow.

If the status quo remained stagnant, then DSWSC might never have stepped out of its comfort zone in 2011 with new management and a goal to improve the tools available to water supply corporations. We can honestly say that our small-town system had fallen behind the times and surely required a tune-up if not an overhauling including additional staffing and considerable financial investment. Wanting to also be a better steward of our natural resource, we knew our success would be implementing new technology within our system; therefore benefiting our staff and our members. After decades of recording water meter data by hand and on foot, toting a clipboard house to house came to an abrupt halt with the investment and installation of an Automated Meter Reading (AMR) system. This new "drive-by" technology was essential in order to enhance data recovery time and data delivery back to our members. What once took three staffers the better half of a week to collect meter data, now takes one staffer one day eliminating the daunting task of meter rereads and scrutinizing handwritten meter readings. AMR allowed staff to pinpoint potential water leaks faster compared to a weeklong review of handwritten notes. This technological advancement allowed staff to focus their time on further improving our system infrastructure including replacing waterlines, installing more efficient pumps, lowering water loss, and system software updates.

In 2015, DSWSC management committed additional funds to upgrade its system software to VTSCADA, a cloud-based data platform capable of advanced customization. This improved software update generates real-time daily water trends to management allowing our operators to react and troubleshoot any water distribution matter; thereby further minimizing system downtime and water loss. We knew that we had improved our data collection efficiency and met our goal, but we were not satisfied being just an "improved" water supply corporation, we wanted to improve water conservation. To reach this new goal, we applied for and received a grant from the LCRA in 2017 helping us to fund an enhanced

meter reading system known as Advanced Meter Infrastructure (AMI). This new networking technological advancement required DSWSC to install mini transceiver towers throughout our territory of operation - 49 towers in total. AMI skyrocketed DSWSC to the forefront of workforce efficiency retrieving data effectively and supplying our members minute by minute information, but DSWSC was still missing the water conservation link we desired for our members. Enter Customer Portals, a new online water awareness tool that our members can now utilize and see firsthand any potential water issues. Our members simply sign up online and are instantly connected to their water consumption used at their home or at their business, truly an eye-opening water awareness tool at their fingertips. The investment in and combination of AMI and Customer Portals allows both members and DSWSC staff for the first time to have an instant water conservation strategy to further minimize the loss of water and equally as importantly, bolster the availability of water. This new online technology instantly sends members alerts of potential leaks or unusual high consumption when once notification took days or longer. Due to developing our infrastructure, DSWSC and our members now work together and save on average as much as two million gallons or 6 percent of water each month. Our system improvements have strengthened our relationship with our members, lowered monthly costs, and we have achieved our goals to improve our tools and conserve water. DSWSC continues to look to the future with additional system improvements including researching the benefits and feasibility of an Aquifer Storage and Recovery (ASR) well. This potential investment will take a lot of planning, but an ASR well is now feasible due to our AMI system upgrades that have lowered our overall water consumption per meter. DSWSC may soon be able to take advantage of surplus water by storing it during good times into our ASR well for use during bad times.

In conclusion, we take great pride in our efforts that distinguish DSWSC over other rural water providers. Our forwarding thinking improvements to our system (AMR, VTSCADA, AMI and Customer Portals) have proven that we are in the industry forefront of water conservation placing our members ahead of profits. DSWSC is in the business of providing clean, safe water, but we want to be known for taking the time and care to be the best stewards of our water as we charge full speed ahead.