

# Innovation stories



Mohawk Valley Water Authority

# Creating unexpected revenue from innovation

In Utica, New York, economic tailwinds are giving Mohawk Valley Water Authority (MVWA) the chance to act on its urge to innovate. Commercial developments and state investments present opportunities for the utility to partner with the city to provide better water solutions. According to Director of Water Quality Phil Tangorra, the internal desire for change was palpable.

“It was organic, and it came up from many departments around the same time,” Tangorra explained. “Water Quality wanted to better manage the quality of the water moving through distribution system, Engineering wanted to control water loss, IT wanted to capture work that’s done in the field, and so on.”

Its approach was to innovate using data-centric decision-making. Utilizing an in-house software that links its customer database to its Advanced Metering Infrastructure (AMI), the utility aims “to provide more useful information both to the public and our board,” Tangorra said.

Data loggers ensure the organization knows of significant changes in pressures and flows. When the AMI readers indicate a certain threshold has been hit, the system generates a report for investigation. The staff will then review the report and contact the customer if needed.

Tangorra stressed that the value of this real-time feedback is “something you can’t quantify in dollars,” and that overall customer outreach has improved thanks to the system compatibility. “If customers call and question how much water they’re using, we can give it to them in detail. This helps us connect the customer with better water conservation techniques,” he said.

The work management software has been so effective that Tangorra believes they may be able to market it to other similarly-sized (or smaller) utilities, creating a new revenue stream for Mohawk Valley. “Instead of us holding everything in, the cloud allows us to leverage our system for other organizations. We can help utilities that struggle with the information flow.”

While the in-house software might prove fruitful for MVWA, Tangorra cautioned organizations to weigh the pros and cons before developing a homegrown system. “[Developing in-house] might come at a significantly lower cost, but you might lose the ability to make large scale changes,” he warned.

Looking ahead, the organization is working with a local communications group to develop the best ways to strengthen its presence in the community, including online educational resources and partnerships with organizations like the Department of Health. “We want to be able to let the community know we hear their concerns and educate them about important water issues,” Tangorra claimed.

The utility wants to serve the commercial revitalization efforts as well. “Our engineers will tell you they have done more tap applications this year than ever. So, we want to be prepared to respond to the business climate,” Tangorra said. He envisions the utility providing an online platform that helps commercial developers seamlessly coordinate their water needs and engage with the organization when needed.

For other water utilities developing innovation plans, Tangorra highlighted the importance of flexibility. “Give yourself options. Don’t pigeon-hole yourself into one path. And you must be prepared to call a project stop. You might reach a line where, despite what you’ve invested in time, energy, money, etc., you must recognize that if the project isn’t headed where you thought it was, then it’s time to change direction.”