

## COMMENTARY

# Groundwater vs. drinking water: Trust no one

By **MICHAEL BOUFIS**

The quality of Long Island's water has been an ongoing discussion in recent days, and for good reason.

Everyone is concerned about their own health and the health of their families and friends. The good news is that the mission of public water supply everywhere is also the protection of public health. Unlike other utilities, natural resources or services, those responsible to provide drinking water to the public have the greatest interest possible in providing safe water of the highest quality because they, their families and their friends are drinking the same water as everyone else. There is zero value and zero benefit in doing anything less.

So let's clear up the misconception of interchanging the term "groundwater" with "drinking" water, because they are two very different things.

The state of Long Island's groundwater is by no means a new issue. Public water suppliers have spent the past 30-plus years understanding the quality of our groundwater and taking all the necessary steps to protect it and purify it. The first advanced treatment system installed on Long Island to make groundwater into drinking water was in 1983, 30 years ago.

No one has more experience or sense of duty to provide clean drinking water than your public water supplier. Long Island's public drinking water is among the best in the nation in both quality and price.

Recently, activist groups have spread misinformation and used scare tactics concerning the quality of our drinking water to promote their own agendas.

Long Island's drinking water comes from groundwater pumped out of our aquifer system, which holds about 80 trillion gallons. More than 1,200 wells scattered around Long Island provide us with 375 million gallons of water per day.

Groundwater is hundreds of feet below the surface. Quality varies greatly depending on factors such as where you are on the island, what the underground geology of the area is like (for example, is naturally occurring iron ore present?) and what

the use of the land in the area is like (residential, farming, industrial). To convert groundwater to drinking water, the public water supplier understands the "raw" quality of the groundwater and processes it as necessary to make a "finished" water quality that goes to the tap.

The raw water extracted from public wells is not what you drink. Drinking water providers go to great lengths to improve the quality where necessary through treatment processes. State-of-the-art treatment systems are utilized where necessary to remove commonly found contaminants such as iron, manganese, nitrates or organics. These systems can include aeration (the process of stripping organics out of the raw water), activated carbon adsorption (the process of adsorbing organics or other impurities out of the raw water), sand filtration (the process of filtering iron or manganese out of the raw water), and ion exchange (the process of removing anions such as nitrate). Over the last 30 years, Long Island water suppliers have collectively spent over \$400 million in infrastructure investments installing such treatment processes to provide clean, safe drinking water.

So, if the water in your home comes from a public water provider, be confident that it's perfectly safe to drink. If the water in your home comes from your own private well, however, its quality is not treated or monitored like that of the public water providers, so it's important to have the quality tested. It is impossible to ensure that untested and untreated groundwater from private wells is up to the required standards of consumable public drinking water.

Don't let scare tactics and misinformation lead you to misunderstand or mistrust Long Island's supply of public drinking water. Do the research yourself. Contact your local public water supplier. Contact your local health department. And understand the difference between groundwater and drinking water. We all need to be informed consumers.

**Boufis is chairman of the Long Island Water Conference.**

