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Boyertown asks DER to solve water test problem

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Boyertown borough officials Wednesday called in the Department of Environmental Resources (DER) to resolve a major discrepancy between two laboratories which tested drinking water in the home of a Presidential Estates resident; one lab found dangerously high levels of coliform, the other found none.

The homeowner, who asked not to be identified, had her water tested by Suburban Water Testing Labs, Pottstown, last Tuesday, after she suffered from cramps and intestinal distress. She suspected there was something wrong with her water, which comes from the Boyertown reservoir, because it had an odd taste.

Suburban Labs found her water to have a coliform count of 105 parts per 100 milliliters. Suburban's director, Richard Stump, said the count should never exceed four and usually averages around one. Stump said the high count points to an inadequate disinfection system.

"It doesn't mean anyone will get sick," Stump said. "But it could lead to a serious outbreak of any kind of disease that could be spread through water."

After receiving the results from Suburban, the resident called the borough. Borough Manager Robert Layman had the borough's contracted lab, Wastex of Pottstown, take a sample of water from the woman's home. The lab's test came up with a zero coliform count and a chlorine residual of .18, which is not conducive to coliform growth.

Both labs have stood by their results and Layman called the DER in to

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solve the discrepancy. Wednesday afternoon the DER took a sample which will be split and tested by Suburban, Wastex and the DER's own labs. The results will then be compared.

"We're going to get the issue settled once and for all by having the DER take a split sample between the three labs," Layman said.

Layman said the water from the reservoir is tested six times a month at different locations and no other user has complained about the water.

Layman said initial tests by the DER showed a chlorine residual of nearly .3.

Stump said both labs use the same Environmental Protection Agency procedure for water testing and all the controls used in their test have

checked out.

John Tobin, a spokesman for Wastex, said he did not know what could have caused such a major difference in the test findings. He said a mechanical failure could have caused the problem, but believed the water authority operators would have noticed if something that major was wrong. He said the labs would be testing water from all around the town.

"Their water plant has never had any problems," Tobin said. "Things can change, anything could have happened."

Tobin said he thinks the discrepancy might be from a sampling error. The DER test results should be in late this afternoon, but Stump said the tests are not necessary.

"They're missing the point," Stump said. "If you have a problem there, it's not there all the time."

"The DER tests will give us a definitive answer," Layman said. "I'm willing to go along with whatever the DER says."

Layman said the DER told the residents they didn't have anything to worry about based on Boyertown's previous records.

Stump said the problem could be caused by a break in one of the water lines, possibly in the home. He said a broken line could draw in materials during high flow periods. He also said there could be a backflow problem with cross-connected water and sewer lines.

In the meantime, the resident and her husband, who have taken to drinking spring water, are awaiting the results which should be in Monday.

Her husband said he is confident in Suburban's results.