

Digging up a controversy in Boston.

He drilled a well; now the city fears flood of copycats

By Steve Stecklow
PHOTOGRAPHER FOR THE PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER

BOSTON — Fed up with paying the highest water rates in the nation, restaurateur Roger Berkowitz came up with the ultimate remedy.

He drilled his own well.

In the middle of a gritty city neighborhood.

"It's a protest over something that's got out of hand," said Berkowitz, who credits the year-old well with saving his seafood restaurant chain \$2,500 a month.

Now Boston officials, fearing that other businesses and residents will follow Berkowitz's lead, are scurrying to come up with regulations to prevent a flood of urban drilling.

Otherwise, some leaders warn, private well-drillers risk draining the city's underground water table.

And that, in turn, could cause foundations to rot and buildings to sink.

And downtown Boston might wind up looking "like the surface of the moon," as one City Council member put it.

Boston officials say they are aware of at least 20 private wells in the city, including a new one at a laundromat in Boston's trendy and densely populated Back Bay section.

"Twenty wells is hardly a trend of major proportions," said Robert Ciolek, executive director of the Boston Water and Sewer Commission. "But on the other hand, there have been more being drilled in the last year than ever before, and I think it's just common sense that as water and sewer rates skyrocket, people will be entrepreneurial and attempt to think of ways to ameliorate the rate increases."

Boston's water rates have been soaring because



The Philadelphia Inquirer / STEVE STECKLOW

Restaurateur Roger Berkowitz next to a well his company drilled to protest rising water bills in Boston. Some officials say such wells could drain the city's water table.

of a massive, \$7 billion regional project to clean up polluted Boston Harbor — one of George Bush's favorite subjects during his 1988 presidential race with then-Massachusetts Gov. Michael S. Dukakis — and replace aging water mains and other equipment.

Boston-area residents must foot 95 percent of
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