

# Boston fears a flood of urban well drilling

BOSTON from A1

the bill for the project, with the work expected to last until the turn of the century.

In the city, the average four-member household now pays \$520 a year for water and sewage service; the comparable figure in Philadelphia is about \$100 less. By 2000, Boston rates, which have more than doubled in the last seven years, are expected to double again, with some annual water bills surpassing property taxes.

Berkowitz, 40, chairman of the popular, eight-restaurant Legal Sea Foods chain, said he had grown alarmed when the water and sewer bill at the company's fish processing plant in Boston's Allston section surpassed \$14,000 a month last year. So he asked his plant manager to explore cost-saving measures.

The manager, who lives outside the city and has his own private well, suggested that Berkowitz consider drilling for water. The manager called in a New Hampshire well-driller, who determined it was feasible.

As it turned out, the well-driller had to dig 945 feet below the surface before striking water. But water there was. And Legal Sea Foods is now pumping 15,000 gallons a day, and Berkowitz is saying he expects to recoup the well's \$52,500 cost in about two years.

The driller — David Haynes, president of Northeast Water Wells Inc. in Hudson, N.H. — said he had been flooded with phone calls from Boston-area residents ever since word of Berkowitz's well leaked out last week at a City Council meeting on the problem.

"People are calling me left, right and center inquiring right now," Haynes said. "Boston-area proper is a brand-new market for everybody."

Haynes emphasizes, though, that wells are not appropriate for every urban dweller.

For one thing, the drilling operation requires at least 300 square feet of space so that trucks and other heavy equipment can maneuver. In

addition, he suggests that private well water be used only for industrial purposes — such as cleaning or cooling equipment — because wells used for drinking water and food handling purposes require frequent testing and are tightly regulated.

Berkowitz said his plant used its well water for cleaning floors, washing dishes and doing laundry. But he maintained that the water beneath his fish plant tested purer than the municipal water he still uses for food preparation.

Local water officials dispute the contention.

"Drilling a well and drinking the water? That would be the last thing I would recommend for anybody," said Ciolek. "You've got a basic choice. Do you want to use water that's been sitting under the city for 350 years, or do you want to pipe it in from a pristine reservoir 90 miles away?"

The city currently receives its water from the Quabbin Reservoir in central Massachusetts.

Ciolek also questions how much money a city business or resident can save by bypassing the municipal water system, because sewer costs account for 60 percent of water bills.

The way to lower your water bill, he said, is simple: Use less water.

"This has been a bonanza for water drilling companies that seem to be saying that all people have to do is drill a well in their back yards and either water or oil will come up," Ciolek said. "It's patently foolish."

In the meantime, a spokesman for the Massachusetts Water Resources Authority, which supplies water to 2.2 million homes and businesses, mostly in the greater Boston area, said the agency did not fear any loss of business from urban water wells.

"We have one of the largest and best water systems in the world right here, and there are communities throughout Massachusetts who would love to hook up to our water system," said Paul DiNatale. "So we're not worried about losing water customers."