



## INTERVIEW

# Trust, Turbines, and Tomorrow's Water

## A conversation with Matt Bowman

BY TALLULAH BURR



**Tallulah Burr** interviews **Matt Bowman** (above), chief financial officer of Truckee Meadows Water Authority in Reno, Nevada. Bowman has been a finance officer for the agency since 2017.

**W**hen we turn our faucets and clean water gushes out, few people consider the work that led to that moment, question how it got there, or reflect on the people responsible.

One of those people—Matt Bowman—is clearly passionate about his job's mission and the environment where he accomplishes it. Located in the City of Reno, Nevada, Truckee Meadows Water Authority (TMWA) services approximately 500,000 customers in the Reno-Sparks metropolitan area. "It's funny," Bowman said. "Reno's tagline is 'the biggest little city in the world.' And our utility is probably one of the smallest large utilities in the world."

Be that as it may, TMWA has many innovative projects to ensure that the utility doesn't just distribute water—it leads a nationwide movement of improving our water systems.

First, TMWA is highly oriented toward public trust and community engagement. Like many utilities, it relies on customer satisfaction surveys to gather performance data. The agency runs several social media accounts to inform its communities about the work it's doing, along with newsletters and public tours of the facilities.

To enhance transparency in financial reporting, TMWA started a popular annual financial report four years ago to break down its cost and revenue structures for the public. The goal is not purely to inform the public—the main objective of the report is to foster community trust through open and clear communication about TMWA's finances.

Finally, the City of Reno organizes an annual "Smart About Water Day," where the city's departments, including TMWA, present their projects. As part of that event, Bowman talks to the public about the authority's balance sheets. "It's pretty simple when it comes to finances, and there's nothing to hide," he said. "We must provide the water, so we must collect the revenue. There's no way around it." Still, the utility makes its budgets as efficient as possible, starting with having a high-quality staff. TMWA focuses on hiring and retaining the best staff possible.

TMWA also has more technical initiatives that make it stand out in the U.S.

water industry, especially among inland communities.

"We have three hydroelectric power plants. We divert water from the Truckee River, run it through a flume [a channel for moving water], drop it through a penstock [which isolates flows and regulates the flow of water], spin a turbine, and then sell that energy to the electric utility here in Reno," Bowman explained. These plants date back to 1901, when they were first created to support mining, following the discovery of the Comstock Lode in Virginia City.

One of TMWA's more significant projects is in partnership with the City of Reno, the OneWater Nevada Advanced Purified Water Facility at American Flat (APWF). Its objective is to create a new, drought-proof water resource by treating wastewater to potable drinking water standards. Bowman explained that these potable reuse projects are becoming more common across the country, although TMWA will be one of the first entirely inland utilities to construct one—thanks, in part, to a \$30 million grant awarded by the Bureau of Reclamation as part of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law.

"This project is a perfect example of how our community has always taken a long-term approach to managing water," Bowman said. "We don't absolutely need this water today, but in 50 years, we will be happy we didn't wait for growth or drought to force us into the aggressive conservation measures that we see elsewhere. It's like our reservoirs. Early in the history of this region, they were not absolutely necessary, but they are needed now and give us much more flexibility in our operations on the river—so we're thankful our predecessors were thinking ahead."

As for Bowman, his career path has been the sort of non-linear path familiar to many local government officials. "I never thought I would work in government," he laughed. Bowman graduated from the University of Nevada in 2009 with a degree in accounting. He worked as an auditor for a few years before moving into the private sector as an accounting manager and, later, controller for Klondex Mines Ltd., a gold-mining company in Reno.



The OneWater Nevada Advanced Purified Water Facility at American Flat will eventually produce 2 million gallons of drinking water daily.

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"I oversaw accounting, accounts payable, inventory, and operational budgets, which I liked, especially because I could go out to the mine sites and into the mines. I talked with the miners, the general managers out there, and the engineers," he said, smiling. "But I had three kids at the time. I was like, 'all right, I need to slow down a little bit and find something more stable' because I was working a lot of hours, and it was not sustainable for our family at that time."

As soon as Bowman arrived at TMWA, he changed his view of local government, especially utilities and services. "We're able to focus on one mission, and that's the utility," he shared. "You don't have to deal with all the other variables that cities and counties have to deal with, which I think makes their work hard for them. For us, the mission is delivering water, and we are going to do it really, really well."

At TMWA, Bowman has found the work-life balance that suits him, as well as a work environment that fosters collaboration and energy. "In the private sector, you aren't really talking to other businesses because you're competing, so you're not willing to share information, and there aren't mediums for doing so. What's nice about government is that people are so willing to share what's going

on and help with what you're dealing with. There is a type of interaction and community," Bowman said. "That's something that GFOA fosters extremely well," he added.

From a broader perspective, Bowman explained that being a part of a bigger mission that benefits the community is rewarding. His team's work has value to those around them, and ensuring that the community's water is safe and reliable motivates them every day.

When asked what he likes best about working at TMWA, he said, "The staff that we have." After a pause, he added, "We really do a good job of problem-solving. Everybody is so willing to just get into a room and talk through an issue. That's my favorite part—working with the people here. It's rewarding and I have learned a ton from the people at TMWA." ■



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