

Kotzebue is recovering from a cold winter

by Benjamin Brantley
for the Tundra Times

KOTZEBUE — On Feb. 10, the temperature in Kotzebue dipped to -40 degrees. I was on call that evening for the Kotzebue water and sewer department.

Inupiat Paitot
People's Heritage

OPINION

The police called me up and told me about a frozen water line at house number 626. I responded and installed a thaw box. As I hopped back into the public works van, a man ran up to me.

"My water is starting to freeze," he said. "I never had this problem before."

"I'll bring a thaw box over to your trailer," I told him.

With a spade shovel, I chipped away the foam around the water loop underneath his home to get to the dielectrics (which stops the flow of electricity to the plumbing inside the house). But I could not thaw out his water line because apparently he was missing a ground strap at the water main, which lets the electricity circulate through the ingoing and outgoing copper lines.

Meanwhile, I kept getting calls from people telling me, "My next door neighbor's water is frozen, too." Then I started to suspect the problem lay at 6th Street and Wolverine Drive, uptown, where we'd gotten our first reports of frozen water lines.

I drove back to public works and got a hold of Leslie, the water plant operator, to see if there was flow from the uptown water loop. When we went inside the plant, we looked at the water meter, and the needle was at a standstill. It didn't even budge, which meant water wasn't returning back to the plant.

Around 11 p.m., top officials arrived at the water plant, wondering what they could do to solve this drastic problem. While they were talking over what could be done about the situation, the number of frozen water lines increased throughout the night. The police station and water plant kept receiving calls from the uptown residents during the early morning hours.

At 8 a.m. sharp, the phones began to ring non-stop and continued throughout the day. By the end of the work day, some 90 frozen water lines had been reported.

The city then declared an emergency and hired some workers from out of town to get things organized in the disaster. Also, many men were hired locally to try to save the water main. Two crews of about 25 men split the job in 12-hour shifts.

The work started to pile up. All day long, you could hear the noise of jack hammers, sounding like machine guns in the distance and contractors' backhoes scratching the frozen, rocky roads. As the operators dug holes all around the frozen loop uptown, it looked as if World War III had begun.

Hydroflush trucks flushed out frozen sewer lines, a steam truck from North Pole thawed out the frozen loop, and a water wagon delivered water around the clock.

Steam rushed from the stove stacks on residents' houses high into the air, like a locomotive barreling down the track. The freezing weather persisted, and we wondered whether the cold spell would ever lift.

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At the work sites, icicles clung to the workers' mustaches, and some of us were getting the shivers from the sub-zero temperatures.

Today, water is circulating again through the uptown loop except for Greyling to 6th streets, between Turf Street and Parmigan Way, the area where the frozen water main shattered.

New six-inch Arctic pipe has arrived, which we are now fusing together to put above ground as a temporary water main. This will provide temporary water-service lines to the residents who lost their water. Then

in summer, we'll disconnect the pipe and bury it permanently.

So far, we've installed 22 temporary water-service lines and repaired several ruptured sewer lines. In the meantime, we continue to shut off water leaks and put them on the repair list.

All along we've worked long hard hours to restore running water so that local residents once again can wash their dirty clothes and dishes, as well as take showers at home. However, residents in at least 50 homes still are

waiting patiently for water to flow out of their faucets. It's something we all have to live with — to expect the unexpected.

Ben Brantley, an Inupiat Eskimo, works for the Kotzebue public works department, where he experienced first-hand the Kotzebue water crisis. He wrote this piece in an English composition class at Chukchi Campus, a branch campus of the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Chukchi News and Information Service is a writing project of Chukchi Campus.