

OUR OPINION

EDITORIAL

Most water is safe, and all should be

Whether it is the level of lead in the water in Flint, Mich., the level of cancer-causing chemicals in the water in Hoosick Falls or similar alarming reports from around the nation, something that once was taken for granted — a clean, safe, abundant local supply of water — is now in doubt.

As a roundup story in The New York Times reported this week, “Federal officials and many scientists agree that most of the nation’s 53,000 community water systems provide safe drinking water.”

Most local water supplies are safe and most municipalities who operate such systems regularly test them, cooperate with state and federal agencies and make results of testing easily available.

Where there have been problems, they usually have come in places that have not been as diligent or transparent. Only after people, and especially children, have suffered, do we find that warning signs had been ignored. The more people look at places where pollution has become an issue, they are finding that those who were supposed to be watching for these dangers were not very good at their jobs, did not respond quickly enough and, most alarming of all, did not inform the public even as evidence piled up.

Nothing illustrates the need for concern better than the reactions of Gov. Andrew Cuomo to two water issues in the same week.

When officials learned that water containing radioactive tritium had leaked into groundwater at the Indian Point nuclear power plant, the governor issued a rare weekend statement, expressing concern and renewing his call for the plant to be closed with

this as another compelling piece of evidence.

As concern continued to grow about the dangerous levels of a cancer-causing chemical in the water that people in Hoosick Falls use to bathe, drink and cook, something that the state Health Department had known about for more than a year before the public found out, the governor was not in a hurry.

He needed more facts, the governor said. Even though it took the federal Environmental Protection Agency to inform local people about the dangers, Cuomo had no qualms about the leisurely pace of the state Health Department. Even though nobody knows exactly where the chemicals come from, whether one factory that uses them was solely responsible or whether others might have added to the problem, he warned against an emotional response.

In a sense he is correct. Action, not emotion, will provide the people in Hoosick Falls with what they need, a major project to clean up their water supply, most likely coming from a different source, and a companion project to prevent dangerous chemicals from polluting that new supply. Legislative leaders who seem to be taking this too calmly should be pressing for investigations into why the health department acted the way it did and what that means for those who rely on its expertise in the rest of the state.

Perhaps what would work best would be an Erin Brockovich approach, a challenge to the governor to drink only water bottled in Hoosick Falls from now until the EPA and others have come up with a solution.

Nothing emotional about that.