

An Ethical Engineer?

by Lionel C. Kimerling, 2-2-10

(based on An Enemy of the People by H. Ibsen, adapted by A. Miller)

It is spring with leaves, birds and sun broadcasting renewal of the seasons after a long winter. You live in a small town in the Norwegian mountains, and you are one of the only technically trained residents. You were born there, and your greater family continues to reside there, as well. In fact, your brother is the mayor of the town. The town has suffered in the past from unemployment and a generally deteriorating economy. As an infrastructure engineer you advise the community regarding construction, the environment and long term planning.

Two years ago you advocated a new concept that revolutionized the town economy. The mountain water possessed minerals with recuperative power that could aid the sick and invigorate the vacationer. Within a year the town was transformed into a popular resort that drew tourists, patients and investors from far and wide. Unemployment disappeared and real estate prices increased significantly. You became the town hero and a member of the Board of Directors of the resort (now the seat of wealth and power in the town).

As part of your engineering curiosity you became concerned that the reservoir for the mountain water did not have enough outflow and that it might become stagnant over the long term. A test of a water sample revealed infectious organic matter. You write a report to the Board recommending immediate closure of the resort before the visitors come for the summer. Furthermore, you recommend a costly reconstruction of the reservoir at a higher location to encourage outflow.

The Board and town fathers do not share your alarm. They are concerned that word of contamination will permanently damage the reputation of the resort. In addition, they want the taxpayers to subsidize any construction, since the resort, even though a private venture, accounts for most of the town's employment. Your brother has you fired from the Board. You are now powerless in the bureaucracy, and you feel that this cause is more important than the jobs of the citizens.

You have no support. Your engineering credentials are questioned. You could publish your report in all regional papers. You could go to national authorities. You are an enemy of the people. What should you do?

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