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\$76 million in drinking-water projects launched in R.I.

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The treatment plant as seen from a walkway in a settling basin. In addition to boosting the plant's output, a project under way will improve the quality of Providence drinking water — which was recently judged second best in the nation.

The Providence Journal / Sandor Bodo

Three major new projects designed to improve or protect drinking water for communities across Rhode Island have just gotten under way at a cost that will top \$76 million.

The work will expand outputs from the Scituate Reservoir, which already supplies more than half the state, and generate more clean water in Kent and Washington counties, which often experience shortages in the summer.

In Scituate, the Providence Water Supply Board has begun a \$40-million reconstruction of its water treatment plant, which was built for \$4 million in 1926. The work will increase the plant's output from 144 million to 180 million gallons a day and improve the quality of its water, which was recently judged second best in the

country.

In Coventry, the state is finally putting to use the land it condemned decades ago in an unsuccessful effort to develop the proposed \$282-million Big River Reservoir. The state's Water Resources Board is now testing two high-capacity wells designed to generate 4 million gallons of water a day that could be available for Quonset Point or parts of Kent County that have faced shortages. Total cost of wells, treatment plant and transmission lines: \$26 million.

And in Washington County, the water resources board recently got the green light from the State Properties Committee to move forward with a plan to use \$9.1 million in state bond money to buy undeveloped land around drinking water wells and potential well sites. The rapidly growing county has no working reservoirs, so protection of well sites is critical.

"This is a good, happy story," says Sheila Dormody, head of the Coalition for Water Security. Her group is an association of conservationists and business people that was formed several years ago when concerns arose about the adequacy of water supplies to support development of Amgen's pharmaceutical plant in West Greenwich and new businesses at Quonset Point.

The new law has not been implemented yet, but Dormody said everyone involved at the State House agreed new supplies would be needed to meet future growth in Rhode Island.

"All of these projects fit together to put the state in better shape," Dormody said. In the future, she said the new law should help improve conservation efforts that will reduce demands for water.

The Providence Water Supply Board broke ground for its project last month. Its costs have already been incorporated in recent rate increases. It will take six years to complete because the system has to keep supplying water while its filters are replaced.

Andrew K. Moffit, board chairman, said the city benefited from "great minds" who decided to build the reservoir in Scituate, where the topography would help collect a billion gallons of water every time one inch of rain fell, support a reservoir that could hold about 40 billion gallons and provide the height to let the water flow by gravity to the city.

The city also built the largest sand filtration treatment plant in New England. The water system now supplies nearly 60 percent of all Rhode Islanders.

Chief Engineer Pamela Marchand praised her predecessor, Richard Rafanovic, who championed legislation that allowed suppliers to set rates that allowed for setting aside funds for future improvements. As a result of that foresight, she said, "We are able to begin this six-year project with the confidence that money is already available to pay the nearly 40 million dollars that this project will cost."

Efforts to develop another major reservoir in West Greenwich and Coventry came to a halt 20 years ago with a veto by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Since then, the state has done one study after another to see if wells in the area would be a workable alternative. It now looks as though they will.

[Governor Carcieri](#) announced Tuesday that the state is finally drawing drinking water from two high-capacity wells near Reynolds Pond, between Route 95 and Route 118 (Harkney Hill Road) in Coventry.

The water may be offered to augment supplies for the Kent County Water Authority, the North Kingstown Water Department or the Economic Development Water District, which serves Quonset Point.

The EPA vetoed the reservoir plans because it concluded it would destroy 600 acres of streams and swamps and produce water that would cost more than 70 cents a gallon. The reservoir was designed to produce about

7 million gallons of water a day.

The two new wells are designed to produce more than half of the water the reservoir would have supplied.

For the next several days, the wells will be operated at capacity so quality and quantity tests can be done, while also determining if the pumping affects groundwater supplies or nearby ponds and streams.

Kenneth Burke, general manager of the state Water Resources Board, which manages the 8,600-acre Big River Management Area and drilled the wells, says it may take another year and a half to complete testing, get a state permit, build a treatment plant and select a local water company to buy the water.

But there is no doubt, he said, after so many years of studies, that a milestone has been reached.

To protect water supplies in Washington County, the state is moving forward with a long-delayed program to buy more than 1,100 undeveloped acres ranging in size from 3 to 300 acres that are close to existing or potential drinking water wells.

The money will come from bond issues approved by voters in 2000 and 2004.

“This has languished for 10 years,” said Burke. “For the last six months, I’ve been meeting with people to drum up interest in our program.”

Some of the land purchases are targeted to help develop a water system for the village of Alton, where some groundwater has been contaminated. Others are targeted for North Kingstown, where existing wells have been heavily taxed.

Henry Meyer, manager of the Kingston Water District in South Kingstown and also until recently the head of the Rhode Island Water Works Association, said the district had waited so long for the state to move on the program that it went ahead and bought some threatened properties on its own.

“I’m glad the program is under way at last,” Meyer said. “It’s long overdue — although I find it ironic that here we are with the economy on the ropes and we’re spending money.”

Meyer said the list of sites originated with a report by the U.S. Geological Survey.

“I don’t think all of the high-yield sites are available anymore,” Meyer said. “But putting aside land for water use and saving open land are both good things. It’s just too bad this was such a logjam, but you better spend it while you got it.”

Burke said all of the money is going to properties in Washington County, because that was specified in the bond referendums. By law, he said, the water board must own the sites it buys, but he could envision long-term leases to local water departments.

He said he will negotiate the purchases with the assistance of lawyers in the Department of Administration. Half of the properties are associated with existing wells and half with potential well sites.

The proposed sites include 15 acres at 158 Botka Drive, in Charlestown; 6 acres on Payne Road and 4.6 acres on Sands Pond Road on Block Island; and five sites in North Kingstown: 75 acres on Dry Bridge Road, 75 acres on Hatchery Road, 5 acres on Gilbert Stuart Road, 45 acres on Snuff Mill Road, and 49 acres at 852 Stony Lane.

Also, four sites in Richmond: 114 acres at 299 Church St., 53 acres on Homestead Drive, 40 acres at 106 Lewiston Ave., and 126 acres on Thompson Trail.

Also, two tracts totaling 82 acres on Waites Corner Road in South Kingstown, and six tracts in Westerly: 101 acres at 58 Boombridge Rd., three tracts totaling 14 acres on Old Carriage Road, 306 acres on Pound Road, and 33 acres on Westerly-Bradford Road.

KEY POINTS New drinking water projects

Providence Water Supply Board is overhauling the water-filtration system at the Scituate Reservoir, which dates to 1926, leading to more and purer water.

State Water Resources Board finally puts on line high-capacity pumps in the Big River Management area that will deliver more water to Kent County.

The State Properties Committee authorizes the Water Resources Board to begin negotiations for 1,100 undeveloped acres in Washington County to protect drinking well sites.

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