

Environmental Journal: Bill would enact steps to promote water conservation

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For several years, growing concerns among state officials and environmental advocates about periodic drinking water shortages, particularly in the summer, have prompted studies, task forces and new but unsuccessful legislation. This year, those concerns may actually make something happen.

Rep. Frank G. Ferri, D-Warwick, introduced a bill recently that incorporates the most acceptable issues raised in several competing bills that did not get passed in the last session.

Also, the Rhode Island Water Resources Board, the agency that coordinates water suppliers and water supplies in the state, has selected a new general manager to replace the one it fired in October.

Kenneth Burke, a civil engineer who has worked as public works director in Westerly and Cranston, and has been a project manager for the state Department of Transportation, replaces Juan Mariscal. The agency said it fired Mariscal because he didn't have the skills to lead the agency in a new direction. The agency did not release Burke's salary.

Sheila Dormody, head of the Coalition for Water Security, says that State House leaders tell her this is the year things will finally come together and a bill will be passed.

"I think we're in good shape right now," said Dormody. "We have heard from all quarters in the State House that everyone wants something to happen this year. We've done enough studies and commissions."

Dormody said Ferri's bill focuses on getting demands for water under control. It leaves other contentious issues to be resolved by state officials.

Ferri's bill, she said, is a "good evolution" of some of last year's competing bills.

Early last year, conditions were so dry a drought watch was declared. Heavy rains washed away the concerns of many. But state officials continue to



The spillway at the Scituate Reservoir, which provides drinking water to much of the state.

The Providence Journal / Kathy Borchers

worry that summertime demands on drinking water supplies are not

only putting those supplies at risk, they are threatening the viability of rivers and streams. The question is how to dampen the demands of people watering lawns and washing cars.

"Acting on improving Rhode Island's water supply system is needed because summer water demand is higher than winter demand, driven primarily by resident outdoor use," Ferri said in a statement. "We need to have a concrete plan that matches our needs with our resources, and have a system that encourages everyone in the state to help make it work."

The bill finds that the "fastest, cheapest and most environmentally sound source of new water is using our existing water more efficiently."

The bill calls on water suppliers to file rate plans that cover their basic costs but also include conservation pricing to reduce demand in summers. The bill also calls on suppliers to establish revenue stabilization accounts to help them set aside funds to use when water conservation programs cause revenues to decline.

Ferri's bill can be found by going to

www.rilin.state.ri.us/BillText/BillText09/HouseText09/H5828.pdf

http://www.projo.com/outdoors/environmentaljournal/environmental_journal_15_03-15-09_23DJLJP_v17.3185d43.htm