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OUR VIEW

Legislation on water use makes sense

It's not often that an issue can bring together 17 public-interest groups from across Rhode Island. But the pressing matter of water conservation did just that, and the Coalition for Water Security's efforts resulted in comprehensive legislation being approved last week by the General Assembly.

The Water Use and Efficiency Act, if approved by Gov. Donald L. Carcieri, would encourage conservation by raising rates for users who waste water and giving discounts to those who limit their consumption. What better way to influence consumers' behavior than by directly impacting their checking accounts?

And, in a move that should grab the governor's attention, the bill also is being touted as an economic development tool, since conservation is the "fastest and cheapest way to make more water available for economic activity," according to supporters. The bill puts a priority on ensuring water for uses including economic development, drinking water, farming and firefighting, while "protecting natural resources that support economic activity and make Rhode Island such an attractive place to live."

"It has been a long time coming, but we believe all of Rhode Island's residents and businesses will benefit from the conservation measures the act will put into place," said Sheila Dormody, coordinator of the Coalition for Water Security, which includes the Aquidneck Land Trust, the Audubon Society and Sierra Club's Rhode Island chapters, the Conservation Law Foundation, the Nature Conservancy and Save The Bay, among other organizations.

In addition to allowing water suppliers to provide economic incentives to discourage wasteful water use, promote efficiency and increase fairness, the act

provides for economical rate structures that would make a basic level of residential use affordable, according to Sen. V. Susan Sosnowski, D-South Kingstown, sponsor of the Senate bill. Water suppliers also will be able to save consumers money and make water delivery more reliable by establishing a funding mechanism that will allow for maintenance and infrastructure repair on a "pay as you go" basis.

The legislation also requires that state and municipal governments use data about water availability when planning development and in local comprehensive plans, and include in those plans goals to conserve water resources and manage peak demand. "Rhode Island cannot continue to take our abundant water supply for granted or it will not be there for us in the future," Sosnowski, said. "Our supply system needs to encourage people to use water sensibly while adequately funding regular upkeep."

The legislation would improve the structure and operation of the Water Resources Board, which would be authorized to set guidelines for water usage and rates.

Water is a vital — and valuable — resource for residents, communities and businesses alike. This legislation takes important steps toward protecting that resource, and we hope the governor will follow the House and Senate's lead and enthusiastically endorse the Water Use and Efficiency Act.