

## Providence Business News

Posted May 31, 2009

FOCUS: ENERGY AND THE ENVIRONMENT

# Support for conserving water grows

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For Sen. V. Susan Sosnowski, water conservation has been an issue close at hand for decades. As a farmer, water is essential to maintaining her business, Sosnowski Farm in South Kingstown.

And even though the R.I. Water Resources Board has been around since the 1960s, the agency has never had any comprehensive statewide policy for water conservation, she said.

But a bill introduced by Sosnowski – and touted by water conservation advocates – could soon fix some of the issues that she sees with the state’s water management system. That comprehensive measure, S-732a, called the Water Use and Efficiency Act, has been approved unanimously by the Senate and is pending in the House. The bill is a consolidated version of three proposals introduced this session. H-5828 and H-6097 were combined and added to the bill.

Sosnowski, a Democrat representing New Shoreham and South Kingstown, said this is the third consecutive session that she’s introduced a similar bill. The first year, it “went nowhere” and last session the water suppliers took notice and it gained more supporters, she said, but was held “for further study.”

“It’s essential to the economy of the state and the environment of the state,” Sosnowski said. “We’re very blessed here in Rhode Island with sufficient precipitation. But we have to make sure the water isn’t wasted.”

Included in the changes the bill would bring is a requirement for the R.I. Water Resources Board to “establish targets for demand management” by July 2010. And R.I. Statewide Planning would be required to use U.S. Geological Survey water data in decisions about comprehensive plans.

“Even though it seems that that would already be going on, it’s not,” Sosnowski said. “There’s building going on without adequate [consideration for] the volume of water that’s needed for residential expansion or commercial expansion.”

Sheila Dormody, the coordinator of the Coalition for Water Security, a group formed to advocate for better water management, added that the bill’s text was created during the three years of meetings that her group and other agencies, including the R.I. Water Resources Board, have been participating in.

CWS Policy Director Harold Ward said Rhode Island needs the legislation “in order to do any kind of effective demand management.”

He added, “We have to have a decoupling of the amount of water supplied from the income of the system – or no supplier is going to be very interested in reducing demand.”

Kent County Water Authority General Manager Timothy J. Brown said last week that the Rhode Island Waterworks Association and all the water suppliers have helped shape the proposed legislation.

“It’s a big issue for us,” Brown said. “We’ve had shortages. We still exhibit shortages in one of our pressure gradients. We’re working very hard and spending millions of dollars to try to overcome it. So, yes, it is an issue.”

Brown said he is hoping the bill will clear up some of those issues.

Dormody said there’s a statewide system failure that needs to be addressed. While a new study on the water use and possible conservation measures in the Hunt, Annaquatucket and Pettaquamscutt watershed will likely lead to municipal changes, S-732a is a step toward more comprehensive state management, she said.

The legislation also sets out directions for water-pricing structures and revenue stabilization for the R.I. Public Utilities Commission, Dormody said.

“That will, at a minimum, make the suppliers aware that if they reduce demand they still have the money they need to keep the system running,” Ward said.

Sosnowski added that suppliers will be required by 2013 to bill on a quarterly basis. “Some of the water suppliers are billing once a year,” Sosnowski said. “How can you possibly do that when you need to make sure you have money for upgrades to infrastructure and need to know the money’s there.”

In a statement, Save The Bay Executive Director Jonathon Stone said passing the bill would be a “great step forward” for water management in the Ocean State.

The bill will also change the structure of the Water Resources Board, adding new areas of expertise and giving the public members more “oversight and participation,” Ward said. Funded by a surcharge on water bills, the board, with members appointed by Gov. Donald L. Carcieri and approved by the Senate, has representation from the environmental, agricultural communities, as well as engineers, water suppliers and four state agency representatives.

Sosnowski said the legislation also takes aim at curbing over-watering of lawns.

“This really came from the Coalition for Water Security – they went through the bill and made sure that nonagricultural outdoor water use is going to be targeted,” she said.

“That’s a real victory for the agriculture industry in Rhode Island, raising the awareness level and realizing how important it is.”

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