

Coalition: Study Water Use Statewide

By Benjamin N. Gedan, The Providence Journal

Jan. 12--PROVIDENCE -- Environmental advocates yesterday called on lawmakers to dramatically expand an investigation of water shortages in Kent County, arguing that all of Rhode Island faces a potential water crisis.

Representatives of nine advocacy groups crowded into a State House hearing of a special legislative commission, meeting for the fourth time since it convened in November.

The advocates said the problems in Kent County could soon haunt communities throughout Rhode Island, given what they regard as a lack of long-term planning by state officials. Nearly 460 independent water authorities have produced slapdash conservation measures and ineffective policies for producing water, preserving aquifers, and protecting aquatic life, they said. This patchwork of water authorities -- including multiple systems in a single community -- sometimes sell water purchased from the same source for different prices.

"The Kent County issue reaches beyond," said Harold Ward, coordinator of the Coalition for Water Security, an association of 10 advocacy groups formed last month. "I'm hopeful they will look at the statewide issue. Some overall management is important."

The General Assembly created the special commission in response to widespread criticism of the Kent County Water Authority, which has been warned of a looming regional water shortage and come under fire by lawmakers for stifling economic development.

But Ward said his coalition -- including the Audubon Society of Rhode Island, Save the Bay and the Conservation Law Foundation -- hopes to seize on the legislative hearings to draw attention to an array of water-related issues.

Ward, a professor emeritus at Brown University, was one of nine advocates to testify at yesterday's 1 1/2-hour hearing. No speaker focused on Kent County, instead emphasizing the need for greater monitoring of stream flows statewide, the threat to native brook trout from excessive water withdrawal, and the possibilities for reusing water before it is pumped to sewage plants and discharged in Narragansett Bay.

"The challenge before Rhode Island is learning to live within our water budget," said Cynthia Giles,

vice president of the Conservation Law Foundation's Rhode Island Advocacy Center. "We have a lot of water here, but it is not unlimited."

Several speakers lamented the annual summer spike in water use, questioning why potable water is squandered washing cars and maintaining lawns. Others called for smarter growth, urging lawmakers to encourage development in areas close to water sources and to attract less water-intensive industry to the state.

"Within the next 20 years, water will be a major competitiveness issue for Rhode Island," Beth Collins, director of research for the Rhode Island Economic Policy Council, told lawmakers. "The current regulatory system of land development and water resources is inadequate to prevent damage to our most valuable environmental resources or assure a secure water supply to support long-term economic growth."

"The General Assembly commission plans to issue a raft of legislation that could fundamentally alter the Kent County Water Authority, possibly merging it with its counterpart in Providence. Jane Austin, director of policy and advocacy for Save the Bay, asked lawmakers yesterday to consider combining all water systems in the state.

Meg Kerr, chairwoman of the Rhode Island Rivers Council, said clumsy water management threatens stream flow and could impact the fishermen, kayakers and boaters who rely on the state's 1,498 miles of rivers and streams for recreation. "You can't paddle if the river is dry," she said.

In an interview after the hearing, state Rep. Raymond J. Sullivan Jr., D-Coventry, a chairman of the commission, said the panel was designed to help the 70,000 residents, in eight communities, who rely on the Kent County Water Authority. But after three hearings, he said, it is clear concerns about water extend beyond the region.

"This is the first time I can remember that we brought together a group of legislators to look at an issue like this. This thing stretches far and deep," Sullivan said. "This does have statewide ramifications. It affects a wide variety of people in many communities."

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