

Kent County water study urges statewide solution

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Recent problems with water supplies, quality and costs have cast the Kent County Water Authority as the canary in the mineshaft: Its recent struggles to provide enough clean water could be a preview of things to come for all of Rhode Island if corrective action is not taken.

This was one conclusion of a legislative commission that studied the Kent County Water Authority for more than a year and released its report March 30.

The report says the region served by the authority is not in an immediate water-supply crisis, but that many problems of water supply, regulation and cost-sharing need to be fixed.

The problems are not unique to Kent County's service area, the report says. The state's water picture is a bramble of large and small water companies; competition for strained water resources; too many regulatory agencies trying to find new water sources; and financing systems that require consumers to pay for capital improvements that serve other regions.

"The kinds of problems we saw with Kent County are statewide issues," said Sen. J. Michael Lenihan, D-East Greenwich, co-chairman of the study commission. "There is lots of water, but the system for security and distributing it is fraught with pitfalls."

The commission was created in February 2006 because of controversy over water supply, quality and cost for Kent County customers. Its mission got a kick in the pants soon after, when the legislature received — and later passed — an unprecedented bill that requires the authority to guarantee up to 800,000 gallons a day for Amgen Inc.'s plant in West Greenwich.

Moreover, there have been growing concerns that water issues could have a chilling effect on economic development by scaring off companies thinking of moving into Rhode Island.

The need for the General Assembly to act in reaction to the Amgen situation, said Sheila Dormody, the Rhode Island director of Clean Water Action, "doesn't send a good sign to other industries that might locate in Rhode Island."

Lenihan agreed. "Early and organized discussion with [incoming] industries has to be more formalized," he said, expressing a common viewpoint that followed the Amgen debacle. "We have got to be able to say to [businesses], 'You will have water in the amount that you need.'"

Now legislators, regulators, bureaucrats, environmentalists and others are saying water supplies and delivery have to be coordinated statewide. There are several reasons:

■ The Scituate Reservoir provides water to 60 percent of the state's population, a demand that several experts say is unreasonable and unwise. "The capacity of [the Scituate reservoir] to be an open spigot for the state is limited," said Kenneth Payne, Senate policy director and a major participant in the commission's work.

■ The state has 28 major water suppliers and 435 small ones (a small water sup-

plier could be a private person who digs a well for his own use).

■ Four to five agencies are involved in efforts to develop any new water sources. They are the R.I. Department of Health, the R.I. Department of Environmental Management, the R.I. Water Resources Board, the R.I. Public Utilities Commission and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. These bodies may disagree on basic facts and block, delay or hamstring an approval process.

"It is time to look at wrapping up the duties and responsibilities under one agency," said Rep. Raymond J. Sullivan, D-Coventry, co-chairman of the commission.

The Kent County Water Authority has two major drivers of demand for water: more suburban residents and economic development along Interstate 95. It meets that demand with water from two sources: 85 percent from the Scituate Reservoir (managed by the Providence Water Supply Board) and 15 percent from one well in the Hunt River watershed.

In 1999, the authority proposed developing four new wells in the Mishnock well field. In 2004, the DEM granted a permit for three new wells that could yield from 3.4 million gallons a day to 4.3 million gallons a day. The uncertainty over the exact yield, however, was untenable; unable to calculate its return on investment and determine costs to ratepayers, the authority abandoned the plan.

Also on the table is a proposed new Big River reservoir in the Coventry-West Greenwich area. The idea for the reservoir was conceived in 1928 and eventually deauthorized by the federal government in 1990 because of questions about environmental effects.

The legislative commission's report estimates that the reservoir could cost \$1 billion and take 12 to 22 years to develop. Timothy Brown, general manager of the Kent County authority, and others, including Lenihan, say the reservoir idea deserves further investigation.

Meanwhile, while there is plenty of talk about statewide coordination of water planning, some believe that coordination is only part of the solution.

"Because the state has not developed a coherent water management policy, we are seeing an increasing threat both to our rivers and streams and to our potential for having adequate water for economic development," said Dormody, who in addition to heading Clean Water Action, is the coordinator of the Coalition for Water Security, a group of 17 environmental and economic development nonprofits.

One point on which the report's authors and others involved in the water discussion agree is that conservation, recycling and reuse of water are crucial.

"The quickest way to develop a new source of water is to conserve and recycle," said Mariscal. "One theme of this report is that water cannot be taken for granted." ■

The full report and related materials can be downloaded at www.rilin.state.ri.us/Kentwater.

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