

Opinion

Healthy water supply promotes economic health

Guest Column: Beth Ashman Collins and Cynthia Giles

Posted Jun. 4, 2007

Rhode Islanders have long been blessed with abundant, clean and affordable water, but these water resources are starting to leak away. Our water is plentiful, but it is not unlimited. If we manage it wisely, however, we have enough rainfall in Rhode Island to meet our water priorities.

But to manage wisely, Rhode Island needs a water budget. We need to know how much we can safely use, and how to manage our water use so all priority needs are met. In addition to the impact on Rhode Island's environment and residents, managing our water supply efficiently and responsibly will have a telling effect on creating a vibrant economy.

Currently, Rhode Island's policy is like throwing a checkbook on the table and simply letting people withdraw water "funds" where and when they choose. Not many people think that would be a responsible way to handle their personal budget.

Fortunately, our legislators are beginning to see that responsible water budgeting translates into a healthy environment and a growing economy. Hearings have been held by both the House and Senate, and the

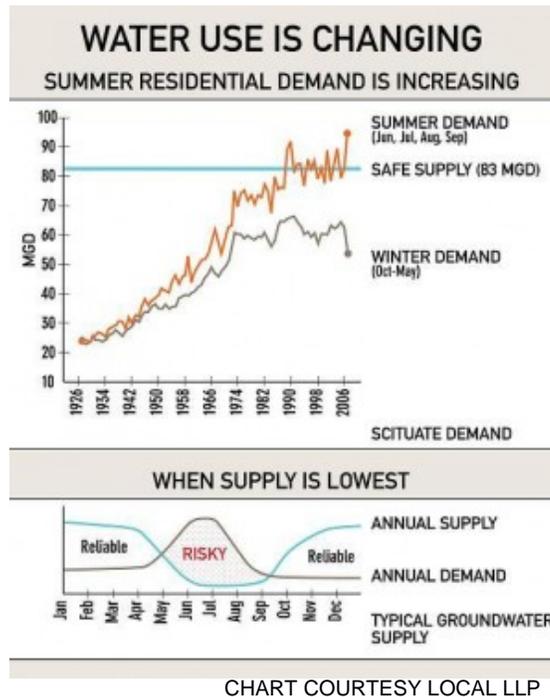
exchanges of ideas and information have been responsible and revealing. One House leader made the point that without a water budget that can allow us to guarantee an adequate supply of water for economic development, we are unlikely to attract any more Amgens to the state.

Moody's analysis of the state's economy stated that "the biotechnology and life sciences industry provides a significant opportunity for Rhode Island," but it also noted: "Of course, the issue of water availability is now in the General Assembly, as last year Amgen's billion-dollar investment almost vaporized."

The Coalition for Water Security, a Rhode Island partnership of 17 economic and natural resource groups, believes that there are four key items that must be included in any legislation that emerges from the General Assembly, or we will not be successful in managing our water and

dealing with future challenges:

- **Preserve the water resources on which we all depend.** Rhode Island cannot afford to continue to deplete our supplies by withdrawing water without limit. The state's plan for protecting the water supply will not be effective unless it is built on clear,



INCREASING DEVELOPMENT in the Ocean State has added to the summertime strain of water use double what Rhode Islanders use in the winter.

numerical standards for how much water can be withdrawn while leaving enough to sustain our rivers and streams.

• **Reduce excessive use of water in the summer.** Much of the stress on Rhode Island's water supplies comes from the doubling of water use in the summertime – mainly for watering lawns – at a time when water is least abundant. This surge in summer water use damages streams, takes water away from economic development and requires expensive water supply expansion. The state cannot manage water for our future without equitable and enforceable action to reduce peak summer water use. Fortunately, industrial and commercial water use increases far less than residential use in the summer and so creates much less stress on water supplies.

• **Take action now.** Rhode Island already has many studies of our water management problems, and there is a clear set of recommendations to address them. The state must establish a withdrawal authorization system that balances the competing requirements of the water suppliers and provides for priority water uses such as public safety, household use, environmental quality, economic development and agriculture. The state also must require effective demand management and water conservation programs.

• **Protect water supplies through land conservation.** Land across Rhode Island has been acquired to protect drinking water supplies. However, there is no provision to ensure that this land cannot subsequently be sold or developed. The General Assembly should make sure that our water supplies are not vulnerable to development and declare that lands acquired to protect drinking water supplies will be permanently protected and will only be used for the purposes for which the land was acquired.

Rhode Island can't allow our waters to leak away unchecked and without accountability. The Coalition for Water Security is dedicated to working with our colleagues and with the legislature to implement the priority solutions listed above. If these solutions are not accomplished this year, we may lose economic opportunities as well as a fair, statewide protection of supplies and resources. A well-balanced and secure future for our water depends on acting responsibly now.

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