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# Squandering our 'wet wealth'

Harold Ward

THE NOV. 9 JOURNAL editorial "Our wet wealth" correctly identified Rhode Island's abundant supply of fresh water as a potential advantage in the competition for economic development. Unfortunately, the perception of abundance and the artificially low price of water (well under the true cost) have led us to squander our "wet wealth." We are in danger of losing this competitive advantage.

Our use of water in the autumn, winter and spring months has been level or in some cases decreasing over the last several decades. Our summer use, on the other hand, has shown a steady increase. Use in the non-summer months includes all of our essential needs — for drinking, cooking and sanitation. The summer increase results almost entirely from outdoor use — mostly for lawn irrigation. In many communities, monthly summer use is double the winter demand. In the summer of 2005 (a dry summer, but not a drought year), water demand in Warwick was triple the winter monthly demand.

The impact of the summer peak is most dramatic in systems supplied by groundwater. North Kingstown, for example, depends entirely on water withdrawn from the Hunt, Annaquatucket and

Pettaquamscutt (HAP) aquifer. In the summer of 2005, and again this year, the Hunt River, drained by seasonal demand, all but stopped flowing. To use our "wet wealth" to attract economic development, water supply must be dependable.

Generally, industrial demand is relatively constant, and can't be curtailed when droughts occur. When a bio-tech firm considered — and decided against — locating at the Quonset Development Park, it could not have helped that the significant amount of water its plant required was not reliably available from an aquifer — at least not without further draining the Hunt River.

A responsible water budget would set our expectations for water use based on what is available in a dry year. Restricting use only in the time of drought is too late to protect our rivers and streams and to provide the reliable supply we need to foster economic development.

The extremes of summer water use drain away water that could be used for economic vitality. Even worse, they are unnecessary. Rhode Island's turf farmers tell us that established lawns never require more than one inch of water a week.

Yet even during the moderate drought of late summer this year, most water suppliers took no action to reduce demand. Of the five suppliers with mandatory restrictions on lawn watering, four

imposed an "odd-even" system — a practice that has been shown to increase water consumption, apparently because when this is instituted some residents conclude that they should water their lawns every other day. And in spring 2007, faced with the prospect of a stagnant Hunt River, the North Kingstown Town Council refused to approve the proposal by the manager of its water supply to mandate once-per-week lawn irrigation.

To take full advantage of our "wet wealth," we need to budget that resource, and allocate it to our essential needs. First, the state Department of Environmental Management, which for at least three years has been studying the amount of water necessary to maintain healthy streams, needs to set standards that will provide the baseline for our water budget.

Then the Water Resources Board needs to allocate that water among competing uses, giving priority to essential household uses and the efficient use of water by industrial and commercial interests, including agriculture. Until we establish sound water budgets based on enforceable water-supply plans, our "wet wealth" will not provide an effective economic-development advantage.

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