

Frank Ferri: A focus on water

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IN CURRENT TIMES, focusing on how to wisely save more money is critical. It is equally vital to concentrate on conserving Rhode Island's most important natural resource: water.

On March 3, I submitted legislation at the General Assembly aimed at encouraging water conservation, protecting the natural resources that make up the state's shared water system, maintaining the competitive economic edge that Rhode Island's water provides, ensuring fair pricing, and supporting the upkeep and operation of the state's water infrastructure.

The Water Conservation and Competitiveness Act will accomplish three important goals simultaneously:

- Improve efficiency in the state's water use. Conservation is the fastest and cheapest, most environmentally sound way to make more water available.
- Ensure availability of water for priority uses such as economic development, drinking, farming and firefighting.
- Deliver the water Rhode Islanders need for priority uses while protecting natural resources that support economic activity and make Rhode Island such an attractive place to live.

Action to improve Rhode Island's water-supply system is needed because summer water demand is significantly higher than winter demand, driven primarily by residential outdoor use. This increased summer use is taxing our rivers and streams, and it is pushing us to look for new and expensive sources of water.

Conserving water should be a top priority for all Rhode Islanders, because it can contribute to economic growth while still protecting the environment. The state should have a concrete plan that balances our needs with our resources, and a system that encourages everyone in the state to help make it work.

With this bill, we can do that.

There are others who share this view. I and many others have worked with the Coalition for Water Security, a partnership of 17 leading Rhode Island public-interest organizations, on the Water Conservation and Competitiveness Act.

They, too, know that the bill would let water suppliers improve the efficiency of water use, especially residential outdoor use. It also lets water suppliers charge more for wasting water, creates incentives for efficiency and increasing fairness for use of the shared resource, and provides for economical rate structures that make a basic level of residential use affordable. Water suppliers would also be able to save consumers money and make water delivery more reliable by establishing a funding mechanism that allows for maintenance and infrastructure repair on a "pay as you go" basis.

The reasoning behind this legislation has emerged from a troubling scenario I have seen in my own city of Warwick. Lawn watering is responsible for water-use levels that often double in the summer, and have been known to triple during that season. That demand comes at a time when water availability is at its lowest.

It is a problem that can be solved by every Rhode Islander by simply adopting basic conservation measures that let us share our common resource equitably and wisely to serve our basic needs.

Water also means jobs. The state must capitalize on the potential competitive economic advantage that our water supply affords. Conservation is again the key to maintaining that edge in the business world, while still protecting the natural resources that make the state a wonderful place to live and visit. By encouraging conservation by using water more efficiently, we would not only give our economic-development efforts a boost, but also ensure that the rivers and streams that nurture our fish, plants and entire environment remain flowing at a healthy level.

We already know how important it is to keep an eye on our financial assets. Let us be sure that we also don't lose sight of the fact that our natural asset — water — also needs the attention of all Rhode Islanders.

Frank Ferri is a Democratic state representative from Warwick.