

Forum addresses need for stemming water consumption

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PROVIDENCE — Conserving water may sound like an obvious and desirable goal, but in Rhode Island and elsewhere in the country, a Catch-22 discourages communities from scaling back water use.

The problem, experts said at a forum on Monday, is that the less water people use the less money water utilities generate from bills. And the less money they collect, the more difficult it is for them to cover the costs of providing the public clean water.

And yet if demand continues to rise, utilities will need to spend more and more money to expand their supply and storage.

“Water is our revenue,” said Pam Marchand, general manager and chief engineer of the Providence Water Supply Board, which serves about 600,000 customers in the state. She said that a 30 percent drop in water use in the summer would cost the utility \$1.6 million.

Marchand sat on a panel of experts at the Save the Bay on Monday as part of a forum on ways to encourage suppliers and consumers to conserve water.

The forum was intended to put a spotlight on the issue as legislation to address the disincentives to conserve wends its way through the General Assembly, said Jane Austin, of Save the Bay. Austin is the conservation agency’s liaison to the Coalition for Water Security, a partnership of state and environmental and economic organizations that hosted the forum, along with the Rhode Island Water Works Association, which represents water suppliers.

The House bill, sponsored by Rep. Frank G. Ferri, D-Warwick, who attended the forum, would result in water suppliers filing rate plans that cover their basic costs but also include conservation pricing to reduce demand for water in summer. It would also result in suppliers establishing revenue stabilization accounts to be tapped when conservation programs reduce revenues.

To get an overview of how water conservation is becoming an increasingly important issue across the country — and the world — the forum organizers invited Mary Ann Dickinson, founder and executive director of the Alliance for Water Efficiency, to give the keynote address to an audience of about 75 people. Dickinson’s organization has briefed the Obama administration on water conservation and was on her

way to Washington to testify before Congress on Tuesday.

Ignorance is one of the biggest obstacles to overcome in the U.S., she said.

“The average U.S. consumer doesn’t know how much water he uses,” she said.

The answer, she said, is about 160 gallons per day. That’s quadruple the rate of consumption in Australia, where arid condition long ago forced the country to conserve its water supply.

In the United States, long considered a water-rich country, 40 of 50 states are already experiencing shortages, Dickinson said.

She listed ways water can be conserved. Half of all water consumed is by residences, and half of that use is for lawns and gardens.

“We produce the cleanest drinking water in the world and we put it on our lawns.”

Places where conservation has progressed don’t waste clean water on irrigation or car washing, they use “gray” water discharged from sinks, showers and washers for non-drinking uses. She also said that Water Sense, comparable to the Energy Star program, needs to be expanded to get more water-saving appliances and fixtures into households.

Water conservation has lowered consumption in Seattle to 1975 levels, but across the country consumption is going the other direction.

Panelist Chris Woodcock, a water finance consultant for suppliers, said that at a cost of \$1 to \$2 a day most people don’t appreciate its value. He suggested that more frequent billing might make consumers more aware of their water usage

Another panelist, Scott Wolf, executive director of Grow Smart Rhode Island, said that the public needs to be made aware that water quality and supply contributes to the quality of life in Rhode Island and carries a price.

Other states “may have a better tax burden,” he said, “but we have a better water system.”

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