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Local forum to explore water-use management

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By Sean Flynn, Daily News staff

NEWPORT — Should the state Water Resources Board allocate limited water resources for essential needs?

The Coalition for Water Security, a partnership of 19 environmental and economic groups throughout the state, advocates policies like this because its members believe efficient water use and management are vital to a thriving economy and healthy environment.

The coalition will join the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission in hosting a forum on water issues Wednesday night in the auditorium of the Community College of Rhode Island. Panelists will discuss “Our Water Future: Rhode Island and Aquidneck Island.”

“Rhode Island’s water belongs to all of us,” said Sheila Dormody, the coalition’s coordinator. “Our healthy and clean rivers and streams not only provide our drinking water, but also support fisheries, recreation, tourism and economic development. With relatively generous rainfall here in the Northeast, our water supply should be a competitive advantage for the state’s communities and businesses, while still providing available and high-quality water for residents.”

The state’s shared water supplies, how much water the state has and how it can be properly used and allocated are expected to be major issues in the General Assembly this year. The Coalition for Water Security has introduced legislation to provide a framework for managing water in the state. The environmental groups came together to point out that the state has no system in place to protect stream flows, no way of coordinating withdrawals from a single watershed and no regulations to ensure that water is used efficiently.

The coalition wants the state Department of Environmental Management to determine the amount of water necessary to maintain healthy streams. That would determine a baseline for the state’s 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,” said Harold Ward, the coalition’s policy director.

Wednesday’s forum will feature two panels. The first panel will explore what policies will provide a safe and reliable water supply to meet current needs, reduce waste, provide for economic growth and protect our rivers and streams. The panel will be made up of representatives of the Coalition for Water Security, including Ted Clement of the Aquidneck Island Land Trust.

The second panel will focus on Aquidneck Island and be moderated by Tina Dolen of the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission. It will include Keith W. Stokes, executive director of the Newport County Chamber of Commerce, Julia A. Forgue, Newport’s director of utilities, Jesse Rodrigues, owner of Rhode Island Nurseries, and Joanne Galuska, from the Department of Public Works at Naval Station Newport.

An open question-and-answer session will follow the panel discussions.

Besides the Aquidneck Land Trust, members of the Coalition for Water Security include the Audubon Society of Rhode Island, Clean Water Action, Conservation Law Foundation, Environment Council of Rhode Island, Environment Rhode Island, Grow Smart Rhode Island, Narragansett Bay Estuary Program, Narrow River Preservation Association, Rhode Island Economic Policy Council, Rhode Island Land Trust Council, Rhode Island Natural History Survey, Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council, Sierra Club Rhode Island Chapter, Save The Bay, The Nature Conservancy, Trout Unlimited, Trust for Public Land and the Wood-Pawcatuck Watershed Association.

The Rhode Island Foundation, the Prince Charitable Foundations and the Jessie B. Cox Charitable Trust support the coalition financially.

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