

Outdoor watering could hinder the economy, panel says

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NEWPORT — The quest for the perfect lawn could have a costly economic and environmental impact on the state and Aquidneck Island, according to a panel of environmental and economic experts that met last week to discuss Rhode Island's water supply.

"The problem is our outdoor water use," said Cynthia Giles, director of the Conservation Law Foundation's Rhode Island Advocacy Center.

According to Ms. Giles, water demand is at its highest when water is at its scarcest. This water-fueled paradigm was the central focus of the Water Security Conference, which took place at Community College of Rhode Island Newport's campus.

"If we had to fix one problem, my nomination would be to fix this one," agreed Harold Ward, former Brown University professor

Mr. Ward, who sits as the coalition's policy director, said that placing restrictions on summer outdoor water usage through legislation could go a long way toward preventing potentially crippling water shortages.

He also dismissed alternate-day watering as an effective strategy of resource management. According to Mr. Ward, such systems, like those implemented in Jamestown during high-use periods, places an undue emphasis on a perceived need to water one's lawn on permitted days of the week.

Pointing to turf farmers working with the University of Rhode Island's College of Life Sciences who have found that lawns require only about one inch of water per week, Mr. Ward argued that the average homeowner is likely over-watering their lawns in their quest for the perfect shade of green.

Mr. Ward noted that the Preservation Society of Newport County relies on Mother Nature in order to keep its lawns green at their properties including the landmark mansions Rosecliff, The Breakers and Marble House.

"If you can grow grass suitable for a Newport mansion, then you can grow grass suitable for a front lawn," he said.

Economic advantages, challenges

The forum, sponsored by the Coalition for Water Security, a 19-member statewide organization focused on preserving and protecting Rhode Island's fresh water supply, drew a crowd of roughly 60 people last week to hear testimony from the expert panel.

"I'm struck at how negative and how anxious the mood is in this state now," said Scott Wolf, executive director of GrowSmartRI, a statewide public interest group that fights sprawl and favors better-managed business growth.

Calling Rhode Island's water supply an economic strength, Mr. Wolf argued that water is a critical need for businesses and is a potential selling point for the state.

"Over-watering our lawns could prevent the next Amgem from coming here," he said, referring to the prominent human therapeutics company.

While Rhode Island may not be on the same footing in terms of tax policies as states such as North Carolina, Georgia or Florida, those states are unable to offer the same reliable water supply as Rhode Island, Mr. Wolf contended.

The Atlanta area's ongoing struggle with its water shortage provides a clear example of the tenuous nature of how climate can impact upon economic forecasts, he said.

Edward S. Clement Jr., executive director of the Aquidneck Land Trust, also pointed to Atlanta in cautioning Newport City Council members from privatizing the city's water supply.

Both Newport and Providence have recently begun exploring privatizing some or all of their water systems in order to offset rising operation costs.

Newport Water, which supplies water to all of Aquidneck Island including the Naval base, is estimated to require \$109 million in improvements over the next 20 years, according to fellow panel member Julia A. Forgue, director of public utilities for the city.

"People forget, but Aquidneck Island is the state's largest island," added Keith W. Stokes, executive director of the Newport County Chamber of Commerce. "Any economic development has to be smart, calculated and managed."

Smart, calculated and managed may best describe one island business's growth.

Jesse Rodrigues, general manager of Middletown-based Rhode Island Nurseries, Inc., said his firm uses 8.5 million gallons of water annually, spread over roughly 500 acres, and is the process of constructing a 4.5-million gallon reservoir and delivery infrastructure.

By comparison, he estimates that more than 65 million gallons of water would be necessary to support residential use should that land be developed.

Speaking to the Navy's impact on the island's water use, Joanne Galuska, deputy director of works for Naval Station Newport, said the Navy maintains 62 miles of piping and more than 1,000 connections and provides water to both military and nonmilitary customers.

"The Navy would like to get out of the business of supplying non-(Department of Defense) customers," she said.

Also participating in the forum were Tina Dolan, executive director of the Aquidneck Planning Commission, and Meg Kerr, chairperson of the Rhode Island Rivers Council. Other notable attendees included Newport City Council members Justin McClouglin and Jean Marie Napalitano; Middletown Town Council member Louis P. DiPalma; and Aquidneck Island Planning Commission members Jan Eckhart and Richard Wimpress.

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