



Regional commission, coalition, discuss drinking water  
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By MICHAEL SOUZA

NARRAGANETT – Scientists, environmentalists, planners, senators and a host of other private and public officials gathered at the University of Rhode Island’s Corliss Auditorium Wednesday night. The topic of discussion was the future of South County’s drinking water supply.

A focus of the meeting concerned the proper management of water – mostly groundwater – in the southern half of the state.

The forum was sponsored by the Washington County Regional Planning Commission (WCRPC) and the Coalition for Water Security (CWS). Jeffery Broadhead, executive director of WCRPC was grateful for the strong attendance. He explained the importance of the issue.

“Our organization is dedicated to developing a sustainable economic climate. We are also dedicated to land use and open space, the betterment of transportation needs, such as the Route 1 corridor and the preservation of water quality,” Broadhead said.

He acknowledged the explosion of growth over the last 40 years, stating migration from the north would eventually strain the county.

Jane Austin of Save the Bay furthered the cause. “The coalition was formed about two years ago. Water planning is becoming very important. Just think of the drought in Georgia, Florida and South Carolina earlier this year.

“It’s important to consider things like conservation and evaluating water use. Things like watering the lawn increase use by one-third and occurs when the supply is low,” she said

In South Kingstown and Narragansett, water is provided by United Water Rhode Island, which serves about 22,000 people. In North Kingstown, the town’s system supplies another 24,000 residents.

Senator Susan Sosnowski, Chair of the R.I. Senate Committee on Environment and Agriculture expressed some concern but explained the importance of proper management.

“Its [water’s] predictable availability is tantamount to the development of South County.

“We need to reinvest in our infrastructure and look for better management.

It needs to be an intricate management system rather than a one-size-fits-all fix,” Sosnowski said.

“There needs to be more cooperation between the state and towns, in order to protect and preserve sources and to develop new systems. The infrastructure must be repaired, updated or replaced,” she said.

The Senator has submitted a bill in the General Assembly for such expenditures last year, which did not pass. She promised to continue the effort.

“I believe that water will be the major issue when it comes to the future,” she said.

The forum enabled the state Water Resources Board’s Chairman William Penn to lay out the facts and the statistics, the nuts and bolts of the Board’s vision for the future.

“There are eight public water supplies in South County. Two of the water sources are the most stressed in the state, the Hunt River and the Chipuxet River,” he said.

A system that is stressed usually runs dry periodically. The Hunt feeds North Kingstown and has been impacted by development. The Chipuxet in South Kingstown has been affected by agricultural uses.

Penn then talked about the Big River area, once planned as the location for a reservoir similar to the one in Scituate. The use of that area as a water supply source is an option, should the need arise.

“Our plans propose the installation of four groundwater wells and a treatment facility. The supply would be about 4.2 million gallons per day and cost about \$27 million.

“The final cost would be about \$2.40 per thousand gallons, which is in the middle of the price ranges charged in the state. And that would include the repayment of the capital costs,” he said.

Alisa Richardson, an engineer at the R.I. Department of Environmental Management reviewed some concerns.

“Proper management is important. We must consider the timing of withdrawals, the amount, the duration and frequency all play their part.

“In some areas of the country, like the Appalachians, watersheds have a retention capacity for years. In Rhode Island we operate “hand to mouth”, meaning the supply is dictated by the immediate weather,” she said.

In the past, state authorities would only regulate drinkable water. Now, some state departments are participating in its planning and management, a departure from the past.

The approach also requires the Washington County towns to work together, in an effort to consider the management of the County’s water as a whole, rather than by each individual town.

Director of the North Kingstown Water Supply Department, Susan Licardi stressed what she felt was the most important variable, dealing with peak demands.

“We have 11 municipal wells, supplying 24,000 people and 94 percent of our connections are residential. Our average supply is 3.2 million gallons

per day but can be as high as 7.8 million gallons. That's quite a difference. Averages don't tell you anything," she said.

Concerns about water supply, how much the state has, and how it can be efficiently used and allocated has drawn increasing attention. By bringing these different sectors to the same table, policies which will provide a reliable supply to meet future needs – while reducing waste, allowing economic growth and protecting rivers - can be developed.

The state's intention is to manage water in a responsible way, providing for increased use while preserving the integrity of the supply.

The Coalition for Water Security is an impressive consortium composed of some of the most easily recognized environmental groups in the state.