

# Water, Water, Everywhere — But Enough? A Mega-Regional Challenge

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When it comes to water policy, most cities and regions face one or more of four critical problems: scarcity, quality, flooding, and system performance.

For notoriously thirsty places such as Atlanta and Las Vegas, water is never too far from the front pages. In other regions, quality concerns rear their head when a surprise contaminant emerges, or when flooding rolls in and out with the weather.

And then there is the interminable drip, drip, drip of our nation's massive and aging water infrastructure system. Perhaps because most of that system is underground and the repair costs are staggering, most people would prefer to put it off until tomorrow — or at least until the next catastrophic water main break.

In the Chicago region, which sits ashore the largest fresh surface water system on the planet, it's been particularly difficult to make the case. But a concerted effort by Metropolitan Planning Council and several regional organizations — including the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP), Center for Neighborhood Technology, Metropolitan Mayors Caucus, and Openlands — is making a real difference.

And we've got plenty of facts to back us up:

- Illinois uses approximately 85 percent of its allowable Lake Michigan diversion (per a Supreme Court ruling), and the state's deep bedrock aquifers are severely depleted.
- Water supplies are not growing — yet the region is projected to add 3 million people over the next 40 years.
- Illinois has been losing 28 percent of the water it diverts from Lake Michigan — about 500 million gallons a day — as stormwater runoff, which overwhelms wastewater systems, triggering overflows, flooding and excessive treatment costs.
- The State of Illinois has \$440 million designated for water infrastructure in FY2010, even though U.S. Environmental Protection Agency estimates show Illinois has drinking water and wastewater needs of close to \$30 billion over the next 20 years.



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## Our Mission

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- Fewer than 20 of Illinois' hundreds of water utilities have pricing systems structured to encourage conservation.
- Chicago has approximately 325,000 single-family homes and two-flats without water meters. It's impossible to manage what you can't measure.
- Funding for statewide core research and analysis is in constant jeopardy, and basic functions such as an inventory the state's largest water users go unstaffed.

In 2009, water supply planning took a major step forward when two pilot regional water supply planning groups — one in northeastern Illinois and one focused on the Mahomet Aquifer area in the middle of the state — completed Illinois' first stakeholder-driven water supply and demand plans. Reaching regional consensus on water issues has been a huge accomplishment, but more coordination is needed. Illinois needs goals that are consistent across state agencies, from the Illinois Dept. of Natural Resources to the state's Environmental Protection Agency to its Dept. of Transportation — and they need to be pursued through a mix of incentives and regulations.

"Water supplies are regional — rivers and rain go where they want — but they're managed locally," explains Jerry Adelmann, president of Openlands, a local environmental organization. "That's where a lot of the actual expertise is. Communities in Illinois need encouragement and flexible tools to help them pursue our regional goals in the way that makes the most sense locally."

- Several promising initiatives are underway. One example: a "Green Infrastructure Grants" program has been launched by the Ill. EPA, with initial funding of about \$5 million for innovative stormwater management efforts.
- Advocates also favor state legislation — introduced last year as the Rainwater Harvesting bill — to allow homes and commercial structures to capture rainwater for non-drinking use on site, most commonly flushing toilets. Such alternative approaches reduce consumption, treatment costs, and stormwater runoff.

To encourage water efficiency and conservation in a region where water — at least to the eye — is not thought to be scarce, regional advocates are also working to "rebrand" water. In October 2010, MPC and Openlands, with the support of Illinois American Water and MPC Board member Larry Howe, launched "What Our Water's Worth" ([www.chicagolandh2o.org](http://www.chicagolandh2o.org)). It's a multiyear communications campaign to raise public awareness of water's crucial role in metropolitan Chicago's regional economy, environment and quality of life.

Our hope is that rebranding, done right, will lead to reinvestment. In many instances, revenue from water bills is insufficient to cover the full costs of providing that water now and in the future. As a result, systems can fall into disrepair.

So a major goal is to develop stable revenue streams and rate structures that promote efficient use. While those revenues would cover the costs of maintaining infrastructure, there is still a need for regional and state policy changes to assist the hardest hit communities — some who may lose upwards of 20 percent of their water to leakage — in digging themselves out

of their cost-rate mismatch. A recent MPC and Openlands report recommended two simple consumption-driven strategies to generate revenue:

**Develop a simple per-gallon surcharge on public water supply systems.** Public systems supply approximately 2 billion gallons of water a day statewide, so even a very modest fee of 1 cent per 500 gallons would generate more than \$12 million a year, or approximately \$1 a year for every Illinois resident (given 2008 population).

**Tax water-consumptive services.** Illinois, unlike many states, does not tax many services, despite their increasing role in our economy. In 2009, a 5 percent service tax on pool maintenance, car washes, and dry cleaning would have generated approximately \$72.9 million

In the end, the success of sustainable water management in Illinois, and in other regions across the country, will depend on coordinated, goal-driven action by multiple parties — state, regional and local governments, individuals and businesses. It means getting the tools like rainwater harvesting right, as well as shifting perception on the immediacy of water issues.

Bottom line: We can't be sitting around waiting for a crisis. If anything, we should be working to avoid one, leak by leak, bioswale by bioswale. So long as our pipes, rivers and aquifers cross political borders, it means we need to do all of that as a region.