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Regional plan highlights water conservation

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A regional water planning group is recommending a wide range of conservation strategies to prevent water shortages.

The Regional Water Supply Planning Group, representing 11 northeastern Illinois counties including Kane and DeKalb, announced the plan this week to address the impact of growth on water supplies. The Illinois Department of Natural Resources commissioned the study three years ago.

Without effective planning, water demand could increase by as much as 64 percent by 2050, planning officials said. The group's focus is to reduce consumption and waste and offers recommendations to improve water resource management.

Tim Loftus, a principal planner at Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, which coordinated the study, was project director for the water supply planning group. Loftus said the proposal is a plan, not a mandate.

"It is up to every municipality to study their own situation and the potential applicability and efficacy of these measures," Loftus said. "In terms of conservation measures, some will make sense and some won't."

Recommendations for conservation include replacing old toilets and clothes washers with new, high-efficiency ones; prohibiting practices that waste water; and auditing water systems to detect leaks and other inefficiencies; and the reuse of graywater from dishwashing, laundry and bathing.

Ruth Anne Tobias, chairwoman of the DeKalb County Board, was part of the water supply planning group.

"The report fits very nicely with DeKalb County's focus on maintaining our agricultural heritage and open space here because DeKalb is the main recharge area – along with Boone County – for the whole of northeastern Illinois," she said.

Dissent came mainly from industrial representatives who were worried that conservation may stifle development, she said. Also, some municipalities feared that it may take away their freedom to set their own policies.

The plan recommends full-cost pricing as a conservation method, which would have homes and business pay the whole cost of water, the commodity and the delivery of it.

"Some municipalities, in part, are a little hesitant for the plan as far as the governance structure," Tobias said. "And where the plan is saying that they should be more focused on conservation and full pricing, municipalities want to be free to do their own management of their water resources."

Geneva Mayor Kevin Burns said he endorsed any effort by neighboring counties to work together to conserve water.

"But whether the City of Geneva will participate in a final determination – that will be determined by cost and return on investment," Burns said. "Geneva has in place a progressive water conservation program already and will continue down that road. We are light years ahead of others in providing safe, reliable drinking water."

See the full water conservation planning recommendation at the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning Web site, www.cmap.illinois.gov/waterplan.

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