Water conservation task force to Chicago: Turn off that tap

By: Paul Merrion Jan. 26, 2010

(Crain's) — A state task force on the Chicago area's long-term water needs issued hundreds of recommendations for businesses and residents to start conserving now to prevent future shortages.

High-efficiency toilets and washing machines, increased metering of water use, more-realistic pricing and greater recycling of water is needed to meet the demands of a growing population, the group said in a report issued Tuesday.

The Regional Water Supply Planning Group, funded by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, has been studying the region's water consumption for three years.

"This is a highly specific plan directed at state, regional, county, municipal, and other public agencies responsible for ensuring adequate supplies of clean water," said the group's chairwoman, Bonnie Thomson Carter, in a statement. She is also a Lake County Board member and president of the Lake County Forest Preserves. "Based on the data, it is clear that continued rapid population growth and economic activity will put a strain on the region's current supply, and significant shortages could result without coordinated action to implement this new water plan."

Access to Lake Michigan water, restricted by a 1967 U.S. Supreme Court decree, is nearly tapped out. As the population grows in outlying counties, the task force said, wells will have to be dug deeper and underground water will need more treatment to be drinkable.

Without conservation measures, increased consumption by a growing population "is likely to compromise the aquifer" by 2050, said Tim Loftus, program manager for the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, which coordinated the effort. "North Kendall County could become problematic much sooner than anywhere else."

CMAP, which is making water use a key factor in the regional long-range infrastructure plan it will be issuing soon, is organizing a "Metropolitan Chicago Water-Supply Summit" in March to start implementation of the water conservation plan.

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