

Regional Water Supply Planning: Comments on Moving Forward

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The Regional Water Supply Planning Report is about to be issued and municipalities (represented by leaders from several Councils of Government, or COGs) have a difficult decision to make.

Shall we support a report that is the product of a committee which was large and somewhat unwieldy (35 members) and which was dominated numerically by entities lacking experience in supplying water?

Should we place our blessing on the overall report when, in fact, it contains several specific statements with which we do not fully concur?

We note that the Private Industry/Realtor members of RWSPG have collectively withheld their support of the report. Some of their stated concerns are legitimate. Municipalities share their concern about imposed decision making on water issues that might supplant local governments' and local residents' efforts to shape their own futures. Similarly, we reject the concept of top-down water supply planning (or management) structures dominated by state agencies or Chicago-based organizations and academics, some of whom exhibit an urban bias and who may be lacking in their depth of understanding regarding suburban water issues.

On the other hand, these concerns are not reason to ignore stark reality. We believe our industry/realtor colleagues are rationalizing their opposition to the RWSPG report, in part, on wishful thinking. It may be true that we don't have available to us the level of information on water supply that we have on water demand. Nonetheless, past and current history leave little doubt that we need to begin taking the right steps now, in order to assure adequate water supply, optimal quality of life and a strong regional economy to the generations that follow us. Moreover, solutions rationally developed by consensus, today, will be more effective, more affordable and less contentious than solutions derived in crisis.

Therefore, suburban municipal leaders see the value of engaging in an ongoing process of regional water supply planning. That commitment, however, comes only with the realization of an appropriate context for the planning effort.

CMAP As Regional Resource

We believe CMAP is the appropriate agency to serve as facilitator, research resource, clearing house and documentor of future water supply planning efforts in the Northeast Illinois region. We envision CMAP as a partner and as a resource for local/sub-regional decision makers, not as the de jure or de facto decision maker.

Lake Michigan and Non Lake Michigan Sub-Regional Groups

The 11-county RWSPG includes eastern jurisdictions obtaining their water supply from Lake Michigan and western jurisdictions utilizing ground water and surface water sources for water supply. While the two groups have some common interests and CMAP can facilitate discussions of those issues, the two groups are largely defined by their differences. Lake Michigan users are free from most of the practical issues confronting Non-Lake Michigan (NLM) users to the extent that there is little reason to afford them a strong voice in planning decisions relating to areas relying upon suburban ground or surface water sources.

On the other hand, the future availability of new quotas of Lake Michigan water will depend largely on reducing the 28% diversion of storm water from Lake Michigan by re-directing it back to the Lake and by adopting conservation practices. Lake Michigan user jurisdictions should be focused on such.

While ongoing exchange and alignment of ideas, information and goals can be facilitated by CMAP, the two sub-groups should be allowed to define and pursue their missions without undue influence from the other sub-group. Therefore, we propose two distinct and largely autonomous sub-regional groups: Lake Michigan users and Non-Lake Michigan users.

Structure for Non-Lake Michigan (NLM) Sub-Regional Planning

We believe that the NLM sub-region, itself, should be organized as two sub-groups to optimize the planning function. This allows for reasonable organization around both political boundaries and watershed source, without creating overly centralized, top-down, unmanageable planning groups.

Specifically, we propose one sub-group consisting of jurisdictions from McHenry, Kane, Kendall and DeKalb Counties in full, and the Non-Lake Michigan users of Lake County. The second sub-group would consist of jurisdictions from Will, Kankakee and Grundy Counties. We are unsure whether or not Boone County – the eleventh county in the RWSPG – needs or wants to be part of this regional planning entity or how it would best be integrated.

The northern sub-group lies along the Fox River watershed and generally shares the deep sandstone aquifer. The southern sub-group shares the same aquifer, but falls within the Kankakee River Watershed. Limiting the size and geographical range of these sub-groups provides for rational planning areas, reasonable logistics and a sub-group size that reduces the potential for dysfunction and stalemate.

Formation of NLM sub-groups

The Councils of Government in each of the subject counties can select municipal representatives for the sub-groups. Counties, who will be valuable partners in this endeavor, can designate their own representatives. Members of the sub-group (municipal and county) can then determine how best to integrate various interest groups such as agriculture, environment, real estate/development, etc. Should there be only one organization representing each interest and should it be a voting member, or should there be two or more non-voting representatives of each interest group participating on an advisory committee?

While all of the interests may be duly represented on the sub-group, actual water suppliers should constitute the preponderance of the members. These planning sub-groups could be formed through a series of intergovernmental agreements (IGAs) instead of statewide legislation or executive order. If this planning model is shown to work successfully, it could be adopted in other regions of the state, either voluntarily or by official sanction.

Conclusion

Regional water supply planning is required because water is a finite resource, the sources of which are shared by multiple communities, whether we refer to deep aquifers, river watersheds, or Lake Michigan. In the past, when water was considered to be abundant – even limitless – the need for cooperative water supply planning was not clear. Today, the need could not be more obvious. Contrary to certain media reports, we are not in crisis, but the fact that we are not only magnifies the current opportunity to avoid a crisis by planning cooperatively for the future.

Top-down decisions imposed by the legislature or by authorized organizations whose leadership is neither local nor elected are not the answer to the challenges we face. Local entities who supply water to their residents, who have the greatest concentration of expertise in the water supply field and who invest billions of dollars in necessary water infrastructure should have the primary role of cooperatively planning for the future water supply of this region. We are aware of the need and we accept the responsibility.

Therefore, while we recognize that there are certain recommendations and findings in the RWSPG report with which we do not agree, overall the document provides a basis for moving forward as an important building block for future regional water supply planning. The most critical part of water supply planning is the development and implementation of sound policies. As stated, we believe that water supply planning policies should be developed by a “bottom up” collaborative group led by local municipal water suppliers in concert with counties and various interest groups. It is in this context that we provide our support to the regional water supply plan.