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As costs rise, using less is goal of Oak Park's water plan

Village strives for multi-year project to reduce usage

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By **Anna Lothson**
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Being so close to Lake Michigan, Oak Parkers may not think about water being a sparse resource. The village wants to change that mindset.

Following a plan that was initially presented to the village board in the fall of 2011, later introduced at public meetings, Oak Park has officially adopted a water conservation and efficiency plan.

Both at the regional level and here in Oak Park with PlantItGreen, the environmental sustainability plan for Oak Park and River Forest that was adopted in 2011, there has been importance placed on water consumption and usage.

K.C. Poulos, the village's sustainability manager, said there is a general sense that there isn't a water issue in towns so close to the lake. The problem with that mindset, however, is that only so much water is allotted from the City of Chicago to municipalities like Oak Park.

"There is a limit," she said. "So, taking conservation efforts, reducing water bills and usage is another piece."

The conservation and efficiency plan will be implemented during the next few years, Poulos said, and will start with Oak Park's top five institutional users. The major users will begin a review process to on how to conserve usage. Eventually the effort will move onto residential consumers.

As outlined in the village's plan, the scope of the project includes: reporting the community's baseline water use metrics, estimating the community's future demand, defining water saving goals, developing an action-based framework to pursue conservation and efficiency measures and engage the village's stakeholders about the value of water.

After a year of research, the plan will involve the village reviewing and updating its ordinances to support the goals outlined. The village will reach out through various methods, including seeking grants, to continue programs to educate people and implement concepts that directly help address the issue of wasteful consumption.

The plan also includes a specific roadmap for village departments to prioritize, budget and conduct outreach and education programs, solicit consultants for a water rate study and track and report water usage.

"Without such a plan, the village lacks quantifiable justifications for these priority steps, and risks missed opportunities for future assistance and funding to water conservation and efficiency methods," according to a village memo.

Previously, the village has engaged in various water-based programming including rain barrel and chemical-free lawn campaigns sponsored by its Environment and Energy Commission, as well as a water meter exchange program.

Energy saving opportunities for residents

The Citizens Utility Board will help Oak Park consumers celebrate Earth Day by giving out free money-saving light bulbs and spreading the word about a free, energy-saving online service that has been showing people how to save more than \$100 a year.

An expert from the board will staff a table at Oak Park's annual Earth Fest celebration from 10 a.m.-2 p.m., Saturday, April 20, at Oak Park Public Works Center, 201 South Blvd. The group will also give an update on Oak Park's municipal aggregation program.

"The household efficiency tips that are so good for the environment are also good for our pocketbooks," David Kolata, CUB Executive Director wrote in a news release. "If you stop by CUB's table you'll get some excellent, money-saving tips, and, as an added bonus, we'll give you a light bulb."

Poulos said Oak Park has been ahead of the game because it initiated the plan before Chicago announced its rates would be rising substantially over the course of several years. She said as summer months approach there is no better time to address water conservation since outdoor water use is one of the easiest to reduce.

"Being efficient with water is as important as it is with energy," Poulos said. "A great place to start is outdoor usage. It can be reduced drastically with rain barrels or through storm water usage and gardens."