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Government

Water Shortages Could Hit Lake County Hard in Future, Chief Planner Says

Phil Rovang: "It's a precious resource that can't be taken for granted."

By Ed Collins | Email the author | April 11, 2011

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For those of us who live on the shoreline of Lake Michigan – the largest fresh-water lake in the nation - some think it is absurd to think that we may have a water shortage within the next 50 years.

However, Lake County's chief planner Phil Rovang warns residents that could happen if the population here continues to expand during the next 40 years.

"It's a precious resource that must be planned for and conserved for future generations. It can't be taken for granted," said Phil Rovang, who has been the county's planner for 12 years, speaking recently to environmental students at College of Lake County.

W.J. (Bill) Soucie, water quality supervisor for Lake Bluff's JAWA, agrees the Great Lakes provide drinking water to more people than any other lake system on earth.

"Only one percent of the water in Lake Michigan is renewable. The other 99 percent can never be replenished. Like an inheritance that earns interest, we must learn to live on the interest and not the principal left to us by the glaciers," he said.

Historically, the plentiful water supply from nearby Lake Michigan has made many here skeptical of experiencing a water shortage, Rovang said.

However, Rovang noted state and federal water authorities are receiving increasing requests from many communities to tap into Lake Michigan to supply their thirst for a growing population.

"Drinking water is not a predictable commodity. Some have it, some don't. We, who have it, must prudently conserve it," he said.

Rovang explained water allocations are controlled as a result of a U.S. Supreme Court ruling from the 1970s. He said demand continues to grow as population expands in Northeastern Illinois.
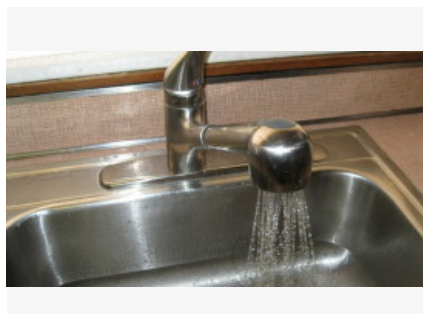
"Demands on water are expected to increase by as much as 38 percent within the next 40 years," Rovang indicated. Furthermore, he said Lake County's water usage is expected to increase by 44 percent during that time.

Where does our water come from in Northeaster Illinois? He said at least 40 percent comes from Lake

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Michigan. The balance comes from rivers and lakes, or wells that tap underground aquifers.

Rovang briefed CLC students on proposed plans for an 11-county Northeastern Illinois regional water plan that was recently co-developed by the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, and the Illinois Department of Natural Resources. The plan is designed to insure the availability of clean water for the Chicago metropolitan area for the foreseeable future.

"Based on our (CMAP) data, it is clear that continued rapid population growth and economic activity will put a strain on the region's current water supply, and significant shortages could result without coordinated action to implement this new water plan," according to Lake County Board Member Bonnie Thomson Carter, who chaired the study.

Another localized study underway involves possible plans for 10 northern Lake County communities to join together in a consortium to share Lake Michigan water. All currently depend upon ground water wells, some which could run dry or become contaminated in the future.

The plan, modeled after the Central Lake County Joint Action Water Agency (CLC-JAWA), would involve building a 57-mile, $250 million network of pipes and pumping stations to transport Lake Michigan water to these communities.

"By using Lake water they would be guaranteed clean drinking water for at least the next 50 years," Rovang said.

However, he indicated that financing such an ambitious project could be a problem for these small, but growing communities.