

City officials urge restraint in water use

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By RICHARD L. SMITH *Tribune-Herald staff writer*

Waco city officials say there is plenty of water. They would kind of like to keep it that way. The city's water plants historically churn out the most water for distribution in the summer months, from July to September. City water department statistics show a maximum of 53 million gallons pumped from the plants in August 2002.

The average amount of water distributed during those months is between 40 million and 50 million gallons, according to Dori Helm, a city water department spokeswoman. That is compared with an average of from 19 million to 25 million gallons produced during the winter months of December and January.

Unlike certain parts of Texas where summer droughts tax water supplies, Waco has abundant water resources because of Lake Waco. It will have even more once the pool rise of the lake by 7 feet is completed this fall. But city officials say they would still like residents to conserve water. To get that word out, the city has launched a media campaign of advertisements and public service announcements to "Please Be Water Wise." Tips being offered by the city tout ways to help ensure there is plenty of water for years to come. The tips also can save residents money. "We're trying to avoid water rationing," Helm said. "If everybody will be a little smarter we won't have to. July, August and September are high-usage months. We didn't want people to feel like they couldn't use the water. Just be smart doing it."

A number of practices can save water. Jim Kruse, vice president of the Lochridge-Priest Inc. plumbing company in Waco, said lending an ear for leaks is one way. "You can just listen," Kruse said. "You can hear the tell-tale hiss of water leaks." He said the most common types of leaks are running toilets and dripping faucets. But there may be a burst pipe somewhere as well, he said

Looking at your home water meter is a good way to determine if there is a leak, he said. "If you don't have any water going, make sure your meter is not turning," Kruse said. "If it's turning, you've got a leak somewhere."

A number of new energy-efficient consumer goods are available to help save water and money. "One thing I really sell are (low-flow) shower heads," said Harold McLaughlin, assistant manager of Lowe's, the large Waco home improvement store.

McLaughlin said the packaging will show just how much water that can be saved on average with such devices. These shower heads can use between 30 percent to 70 percent less water while still providing "invigorating," showers, according to literature from the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality.

Helm also said some everyday practices in the home can be altered slightly to conserve water. For instance, someone who showers with a constant flow for six minutes could cut consumption from 60 gallons of water to 9 gallons by getting wet, shutting off the water, soaping and rinsing, according to information provided by the city.

Water usage can be reduced from 15 gallons to 1 gallon by plugging and filling the sink to shave instead of shaving with the tap running. Other savings include a reduction of from 30 gallons to 6 gallons by closing a drain or using a dishpan to wash and rinse dishes rather than washing the dishes by hand with the water running.

These three practices alone could potentially save \$4.50 a month on a home water bill within the Waco city limits based on the city's rates and the average residential usage figure of some 107,000 gallons of water each year, according to city estimates.

The state has some limited tax breaks available for conservation.

John Sutton of the Texas Water Development Board in Austin said the state's tax code allows for sales tax exemptions on certain equipment used for rainwater harvesting. He suggested checking with the State Comptroller's Office for more specific information.

The state also allows limited property tax exemptions for certain conservation practices allowed by taxing entities. However, none of the local government entities in McLennan County currently offer those breaks, said Robert Waldrop, chief appraiser of the McLennan County Appraisal District.

Water also can be saved outside the home. The TCEQ suggests using a cutoff nozzle for washing your car instead of running the hose continually. The state's environmental agency said homeowners can implement their own rationing program for watering lawns.

Agency literature suggests cutting back on watering to no more than once every five days with no more than 1 inch of water at a time. Water lawns before 10 a.m. or 8 p.m. to avoid evaporation. And if it rains, wait five days to water.

More information on how to save water can be obtained by calling the city water department at 299-2489 (CITY). The information is also on the city's Web site, where consumers may pay their water bill online.

On the Web: www.waco-texas.com

Richard L. Smith can be reached at 757-5745 or at rsmith@wacotrib.com.