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EXCLUSIVE REPORTS

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N. Texas water conservation efforts fall short

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Twenty years ago, faced with a looming water shortage and no new supplies to tap, the city of San Antonio mounted an aggressive conservation campaign.

By 2002, the most recent year for which figures are available, those conservation efforts -- fixing leaky pipes, restricting landscape watering, developing rebate programs for low-flow toilets and washing machines, among other incentives -- cut the per-capita daily water consumption in the city from 212 gallons to just 112.

San Antonio is now being held up as an example of what municipalities can accomplish through conservation, rather than relying exclusively on new supplies. According to a study from the [National Wildlife Federation](#), nowhere is the opportunity for conservation savings greater than in Region C, the water district that includes Dallas-Fort Worth and surrounding suburbs.

Dallas is the biggest water hog among major Texas cities, with a per-capita daily consumption of 245 gallons -- more than double San Antonio's rate, according to the [Texas Water Development Board](#). Fort Worth comes in second with 205 gallons, followed by Austin and El Paso (tied at 171 gallons) and Houston (161 gallons).

Of Region C municipalities, Highland Park, with its lush, landscaped lawns, is the biggest user, with a per-capita daily consumption of 381 gallons -- one of the highest rates in the state -- followed by Addison (368 gallons), Southlake (323 gallons) and Frisco (287 gallons).

The state's Water Conservation Implementation Task Force recommends that cities work to achieve a daily per-capita consumption rate of 140 gallons.

By the year 2050, through conservation efforts alone, Region C could save anywhere from 52 billion gallons of water a year with minimal conservation efforts to a whopping 170 billion gallons with higher efforts, according to the NWF. Statewide, Texas could save anywhere from 132.5 billion gallons to 341 billion gallons.

Heeding a call to make conservation a part of its long-range water plan, the Dallas City Council in March approved a program that aims to cut per-person use by 5% over the next five years, and another 10% by 2060.

Some business leaders, including Andres Ruzo, CEO of Rowlett-based [LinkAmerica](#), a technology services company, said the mostly voluntary strategies are not enough. He points out that even by following the city's plan, in 55 years average consumption among Dallas residents would still be greater than 200 gallons a day.

Growing up in South America, Ruzo said he learned to appreciate fresh, running water.

"When you open up a faucet in South America, you never know what's going to come out," he said. "Here, you open up a faucet and expect water; you flip on a switch and expect light. What's taken for granted here is not taken for granted there."

Two years ago, while serving as chairman of the Greater Dallas Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, Ruzo convinced the group to get involved in water planning efforts, focusing specifically on the area of conservation.

"Nothing was being done to address the issue," he said. "The options were either 'new supply' or 'new supply.' I was amazed the Latino chamber had to take leadership in such an important matter -- not the Dallas City Council, not the Greater Dallas Chamber."

Not paying attention

The GDHCC joined forces with the NWF to develop conservation recommendations. Believing it was important for minority organizations to take a leadership role in conservation awareness -- and have a voice in water-planning decisions -- Ruzo convinced the NAACP, Greater Dallas Asian Chamber, Dallas Black Chamber of Commerce, Urban League and North Texas Cantonese Association to get on board.

The group studied the success of programs in San Antonio and El Paso and created a 'SmartWater' initiative that focuses on education and creating conservation awareness.

Last year, the group presented its ideas to the Dallas City Council. This helped lead to the conservation strategies being included in the city's longterm plan, Ruzo said. Still, he adds, the measures fall short of what could be accomplished.

"The easy solution is to throw money at it and develop new supplies," he said. "The tough thing is to put work into it. Conservation has already proven to be successful in other cities. Dallas should be a leader, not a follower. But we're not even paying attention."

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