

City aims to significantly cut water use Higher rates for big users, mandatory restrictions could be in the works By Sarah Coppola

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Most folks waste water and don't realize it.

They water their lawns too much, clean and rinse dishes by hand instead of running the dishwasher and hang on to water-guzzling old models of toilets and washing machines.

It is such actions as these that Austin officials will try to change as they implement new, more aggressive conservation ideas. The City Council recently set a goal to dramatically cut water use in the next decade.

It won't be cheap or easy. A recent survey found that most Central Texans do not know where their water comes from (Austin's comes from the Colorado River) or how to conserve it.

Austin estimates that it conserves 700,000 gallons a day with its current conservation efforts; the council hopes to save three times that amount, still a fraction of the average daily use of 140 million gallons. They have not approved specific new programs yet — the details will be ironed out in the next year — but several ideas are on the table.

"You have to think of it like a portfolio of retirement investments. You want to do a little bit of everything" to make a dent, said Tony Gregg, Austin's water-conservation manager.

At the top of the list: lawn watering. It's a big water hog, especially when folks water during the day (when water evaporates faster), during rainstorms or into the street.

Lawn watering consumes about 70 million gallons of water a day during the hottest parts of the summer, increasing Austin's total daily usage to a peak of 230 million gallons.

Most lawns need only half an inch of water every five days in the summer, Gregg said, but many people overwater, unnecessarily saturating areas below the roots.

The biggest residential water users live in West and Northwest Austin, where, Gregg said, lots are bigger and residents spend more on lawn care. The University of Texas and companies such as Freescale Semiconductor, Spansion and Samsung use the most water annually, though Gregg said the computer chip makers have processes in place to reuse their water.

Austin already has a tiered billing system, requiring bigger residential water users to pay more. Bumping up rates even more for big

users — something that activists such as Bill Bunch of the Save Our Springs Alliance support — would save the most water with the least cost or hassle, a recent city study found.

Carole Baker, who served on a task force that studied water conservation statewide, said San Antonio and El Paso slashed their water use by increasing rates for big users and actively educating residents about water waste. "If you help people understand what the problem is, they'll want to help be part of the solution, especially in an environmentally minded place like Austin," she said.

For now, the council does not plan to mandate a watering schedule for homeowners because it wants to reserve that option for emergencies such as droughts.

However, the council might require commercial and multifamily housing properties to stick to a watering schedule because, unlike homes, most larger businesses have automated lawn-watering systems. (Commercial properties are already prohibited from watering during the day in the summer, a rule Austin enforces when complaints are filed.)

Producing more "reclaimed" water — treated wastewater — to water lawns could help Austin save drinking water. But treating and distributing more of it would be costly (\$12 million) because the city would have to build many new pipes. The city currently provides reclaimed water to a few entities, such as golf courses.

Austin already has programs to give away efficient shower heads and rebates for efficient toilets and washing machines. (More than 94,000 old toilets citywide have been replaced through those rebates in the past decade.) The city might beef up those programs by requiring property owners to install water-efficient features before they sell a home or business. They might also require apartments to sub-meter — basically, bill each apartment dweller for the exact amount of water he or she uses.

The city also loses about 12 million gallons a day through leaks (average for a city this size), so another option would be to focus on reducing those. But Austin would probably have to hire more staff to really crack down on the problem, Gregg said.

Water audits, which are voluntary right now, could also become mandates. City workers assess how much water larger properties use and suggest ways to conserve it.

San Antonio cut its per capita water use from 225 gallons per day in the early 1980s to 130 gallons today by making several changes, including requiring at least four inches of soil under new turf grass (which helps cut watering needs) and hiring police officers to track and ticket customers who repeatedly water their lawns during the day, which is against the law there.

Austin's per capita usage is about 170 gallons.

Karen Guz, San Antonio's conservation director, said the key is reaching out to the public. (For example, the city gives away 4,000

efficient toilets one day each year by paying volunteers such as the Girl Scouts to go door-to-door and sign up homeowners who want them.)

To that end, the Lower Colorado River Authority will launch a campaign soon urging Central Texas residents to conserve; one possible TV ad shows a balding man with the tag line: "His hairline isn't the only thing receding in Central Texas . . . Use less water, and make it last."

Tips for conserving water:

- Use sprinklers at night, and don't sprinkle the street. Most lawns need only half an inch of water every five days; test how long sprinklers must run by placing a container on the lawn and measuring. Buy a hose timer.
- Scrape dishes and run the dishwasher (most use less than 6 gallons of water) instead of pre-rinsing or washing dishes by hand (20 gallons or more).
- Contact the city at 974-2199 or go to <http://www.waterwiseaustin.org> to ask about free shower heads and rebates for new toilets and washing machines or to request a water-use audit.

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