Treat water as money, because it is

Les Minor – Editor, Texarkana Gazette, 5/7/2007

Businessmen know in tough times a key strategy is expense control. If you cant make more, spend less. If you cant generate more wealth, increase the purchasing power of the wealth you have.

But what is tried and true in the world of business math and household finance seldom gets more than a cursory nod when it comes to how we manage water resources.

The concern is largely about how we can collect and move more water to where we need it and less about how we can conserve and stretch existing supplies. Its all about building reservoirs and not about lessening the appetite.

While the state water plan does call for more and better conservation efforts, including saving 200 billion gallons of water annually by 2060, the National Wildlife Federation and its experts say that amount is low and saving 326 million gallons is easily achievable.

San Antonio is the poster child for how to conserve. It dropped its daily per person water consumption from 225 gallons in the early 1980s to 140 gallons today.

It achieved this reduction by addressing everything from infrastructure, to appliances, to ordinances and glutton penalties. Lawn watering is controlled for effectiveness. Water supply lines that leak are replaced. Incentives are provided for drought-resistant plants and grasses. Rebates are given for clothes washers, shower heads and other appliances that use water efficiently. Large-tank toilets were the first to go.

The city took a stick and carrot approach, penalizes heavy users by upping the price per gallon, but otherwise helping businesses find and utilize the newest in water-stingy technology.

The results speak volumes. Still, the city thinks it can trim another 16 gallons per person by 2060.

The Dallas metroplex sits in stark contrast. Its daily per person usage is 238 gallons, a top user among Texas cities. This thirst is why officials there are so anxious about building Marvin Nichols Reservoir in Northeast Texas. It is to feed a need they dont see how to contain.

Dallas isnt as arid as San Antonio, so presumably it wouldnt have to work as hard (though it should). It gets 34 inches of rain annually, while San Antonio gets 30.

And experts say reasonable conservation efforts would pay big dividends and render most of the states $5 billion dollar reservoir plan unnecessary, or at least push it back.

A report by the National Wildlife Federation titled 'Save Water, Save Rivers, Save Money: The Potential of Municipal Water Conservation in Texas' claims that 'reasonable conservation efforts by cities could negate the need for the 16 new reservoirs in the Texas water plan.

Dr. Norman Johns, who did much of the research, says 'Conservation is not just easier on our rivers and streams, its also easier on taxpayers wallets.

In San Antonio, for example, officials estimate for every dollar spent on conservation, they avoid $7 in expenses on creating new water supplies.

Johns also warns the volume of water these new reservoirs will be able to supply might be overestimated. Thats because drought conditions and increased evaporation could significantly decrease yield estimates.

'The only question is how much less Johns says. 'Using the water we already have more efficiently will help extend our municipal supplies.

The report suggests conservation could supply an equivalent amount of water at a lower cost. The report also singles out the folly of building Marvin Nichols.

It says, because the state water plan creates surplus, only a small part of Marvin Nichols capacity about 15 billion gallons of water will be needed by 2060. The water will be piped to some of the most hoggish users in the state, and the report says conservation efforts could save 91 billion gallons annually.

Thats a pretty decent plug for conservation. But there are others with differing opinions, of course.

There is also a deep-seated human fear that seems to fly in the face of conservation efforts. Water is so vital of our lives and our civilization were scared to not have enough in reserve.

Having a glass of water in hand is a lot more comforting than being told we dont need as much water as we think we do. Hence, we build reservoirs and make conservation the afterthought.

We would all be better off if we turned that equation around.