

COMMENTARY

## **Walker: Saving the environment, money a drop at a time**

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This week, the Austin City Council will decide on a crucial water conservation plan. The goal of the plan is to reduce Austin's peak daily water usage by 1 percent per year for the next 10 years. That means that Austin would use about 25 million gallons per day less water on most summer days.

Why is this important? Saving water is easy and benefits our pocketbooks. And saving water protects the environment.

Water conservation saves the city — and therefore Austinites — money because it allows the city to delay the construction of water treatment plants, which can cost hundreds of millions of dollars.

Conservation will also allow the city to save about \$10 million in payments to the Lower Colorado River Authority (LCRA) for every year we avoid hitting certain water-use levels.

Conservation helps the environment because Austin's water supply comes from the Colorado River. By using less water, more will be available to support the natural environment in Austin and downstream all the way to Matagorda Bay.

Where will these water savings come from?

Council Member Lee Leffingwell's Water Conservation Task Force has identified many simple steps that we can all take to achieve the city's water savings goals. The steps include:

- Setting sprinkler systems correctly and not running them in the rain.
- Adopting city policies that set standards for irrigation system installations and efficiency.
- Repairing leaks in the water distribution system.
- Enhancing efforts at public education about water conservation.
- Requiring at least 6 inches of soil around new homes where grass will be planted.

The projected cost to implement the task force recommendations is \$3.7 million, a bargain compared with the price of constructing water treatment plants and buying more water. Using

water more efficiently is the most environmentally friendly way to increase our water supply.

Other cities have had success with water conservation. Albuquerque, N.M., has cut its water use 14 percent by applying a surcharge for excessive water use. The money from the surcharge is allocated to water conservation programs. Albuquerque gives customers more information on their bills about their water use, providing tools to establish less water intensive landscapes and installing high-efficiency plumbing fixtures. Seattle reduced its per capita water use by 20 percent by making excessive lawn-watering more expensive, aggressively replacing old toilets and fixtures and fixing leaky pipes and other items.

These measures are very similar to ones that Austin is considering.

It is imperative that Austin use water resources efficiently.

The task force recommendations, if implemented, will put Austin at the forefront of water conservation.

Walker is a water resources specialist with the Lone Star Chapter of the Sierra Club.

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