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Local officials preparing water plan for North Texas

BY LESLIE WIMMER

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North Texas water districts and planning groups are working to put together the region's third comprehensive water plan outlining conservation, use and supply strategies to meet demands through 2060.

The plan will be submitted by the Region C Water Planning group – which oversees water planning in the 16 counties that make up the North Texas region – to the Texas Water Development Board in October. The latest plan is an updated version of the plan Region C submitted in 2006, and will show updated population and water demand estimates, outline goals for conservation and reuse strategies, and update information on which sources districts and regions plan to use in the future to obtain water.

“There will be some minor changes to the plan because what you’re doing during the course of the planning cycle is you’re looking at population and demand out there, and water needs, and asking if anything has changed,” said James Parks, executive director of the North Texas Municipal Water District and chair of the Region C Water Planning Group. “We’ve got a plan in place now, so what we’re doing in this cycle is looking at whether our [estimates] that produced that plan remain the same, or do we need to add a little more or take away from it.”

History of regional plans

The Region C planning group first began putting together a comprehensive water plan to submit to the Texas Water Development Board in 1997, after the State Legislature passed a bill in response to droughts through the '90s requiring regions to plan how to meet water needs in the future, Parks said.

The legislature “recognized that our population was increasing dramatically, and that over our planning horizons we were looking at doubling our population,” Parks said.

The legislature passed Senate Bill 1 in the late '90s, requiring all 16 water planning regions in Texas to submit comprehensive water plans to the Texas Water Development Board. After all 16 regions submit plans, the Texas Water Development Board merges those plans into a larger, state-wide report to submit to the legislature.

“No other action is required by the legislature” after the Development Board submits the statewide plan, Parks said. “It is simply adopted and then developed by the board.”

Before the Region C planning group will formally submit their plan, though, officials will ask for public input, opinions and ideas on water planning and conservation in North Texas at a May 25 meeting at the Bob Duncan Center in Arlington's Vandergriff Park.

Conservation support continues to

increase

As attention to environmentalism has grown in recent years, conservation has become a larger part of the state's water planning outlook, Parks said. Today, conservation makes up about 25 percent of water use strategy in the plan, said Russell Laughlin, senior vice president of Hillwood Properties. Laughlin serves as a private sector representative and secretary to the Region C Water Planning board.

Through 2005 and 2006 Texas experienced significant droughts, which helped focus the public on water issues, Parks said.

"There is not an unlimited amount of high-quality, fresh water out there, and when it doesn't rain, the reservoir levels drop and that can cause problems," Parks said. "So, building on that wake-up call from Mother Nature, the Tarrant Regional Water District, Dallas Water Utilities and the North Texas Municipal Water District launched a very expensive public awareness campaign that called attention to the value of water and the need to not waste water. We're not trying to limit or repress the quality of life, we're not saying to tear up your lawn and your bushes and plant AstroTurf, we're just saying don't water the pavement and if you have something leaking, fix it."

Those ads brought more awareness to water conservation issues, Parks said, and that awareness is reflected in reduced amounts of water use not only at the same population levels but as the North Texas region's population has increased.

Water planning as a business concern

Along with growing attention to conservation, businesses have become more aware of the economic importance of a state having a comprehensive water use plan over the last several years, Laughlin said.

For a business considering a move to Texas, and taking into consideration the state's water supply is made up entirely of surface lakes, Laughlin said the current and future costs of water use are common decision making factors. Water costs can be an especially important factor for businesses in the manufacturing industry, which often need large amounts of water to operate.

“If I’m a CEO and I’m coming to North Texas... and I see we have a well thought-out water plan, I’m going to have comfort in that, especially if my company is one where water is key to operation,” Laughlin said. “The consequence of not having a plan would be catastrophic to economic development in North Texas.”

On the Web: www.regioncwater.org and
www.window.state.tx.us/specialrpt/water/intro.php

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