

## **Dallas only city so far to act on mayors' water-saving pledge**

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In mid-April, the mayors of Dallas, Fort Worth, Arlington and Irving banded together in a show of regional unity on water conservation.

“It is a limited resource,” said Fort Worth Mayor Betsy Price. “When it’s gone, it’s gone.”

Price and her three colleagues stood at a podium at Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport and, one by one, pledged their support for mandatory twice-weekly restrictions on lawn irrigation that experts say would save billions of gallons without harming landscapes.

But more than a month later, only Dallas has followed through, and it’s not clear when — or if — the other cities will join.

Despite the mayors’ continued support for a regional water strategy, political pushback and concerns about lost revenue have indefinitely hobbled passage of similar restrictions. With area reservoirs full from unexpectedly heavy rains over the winter and spring, enthusiasm for stricter water policies seems to have dried up.

But it was only a few months ago that reservoirs supplying North Texas were dangerously depleted. Dallas was in active negotiations with Irving and the North Texas Municipal Water District to sell those entities water from its own dwindling supply.

Mayor Mike Rawlings, who led the Dallas City Council to a 12-2 vote last month to enact the restrictions, said he believes the whole region will eventually adopt tougher limits. But he isn’t certain when.

“Making sure we as a community get aligned is more important than the speed at which we do it,” Rawlings said. “I’m committed to doing this for the long term, and I believe the citizens of the metroplex will rally around this. It’s just going to take a while. It’s a cultural change.”

In the meantime, some Dallas residents might wonder why their city was the first and — so far — only one to take the plunge in restricting watering, particularly when Dallas taxpayers have spent generations and untold billions to build the city’s reservoir system.

Arlington Mayor Robert Cluck was apologetic after his City Council didn’t get behind a plan he called a responsible step for the future.

“Every year we can get by without having to get new sources of water, it’s better for everybody,” he said.

New supplies of water are increasingly hard to find, and the construction of new reservoirs is massively expensive and politically explosive.

In coming decades, new water sources will be needed no matter what conservation measures are put in place, regional water planners say. But effective conservation now can delay the need by many years.

Cluck said he still supports restrictions for Arlington, but he isn’t sure he can overcome opposition. On April 24, when the Arlington council was set to vote on restrictions, a group of tea party supporters spoke out against the plan, which they called un-American.

Cluck was then unable to get anyone on the council to second a motion to call the item to a vote.

“I’m sorry Dallas did that without the support I thought was going to be behind it,” he said.

In Fort Worth, the council has been briefed but hasn't attempted to vote on additional conservation measures. There, political opposition is mixed with concern that restrictions could reduce revenue.

Price said city staff members are working on a study to better understand how conservation would affect revenue the city relies on for its water department.

She expects council members will be briefed again on a plan in midsummer. But if they ultimately vote, it might not be for twice-weekly restrictions, and there are no guarantees any restriction will pass, she said.

"On my council, I'm only one vote," Price said. "I'm hopeful when they get the information from my water department, the council will work together to find the responsible solution for our community."

Arlington and Fort Worth draw water from the Tarrant Regional Water District, which is strongly urging its member cities to adopt twice-weekly restrictions.

Linda Christie, community and governmental relations director for the water district, said she plans to provide more information to the Fort Worth and Arlington councils on conservation.

Once they have the information, she believes, they will be receptive to new restrictions.

"It hasn't fallen apart; it's slowed down. The Dallas City Council had been briefed a couple of times. The Arlington and Fort Worth councils haven't had the same level of briefing," Christie said.

Irving's council is also playing catch-up on a conservation plan. Among smaller cities, Irving is unique because it supplies most of its own water — from Lake Chapman in East Texas.

Last year's drought marked the second time that Lake Chapman has become seriously depleted, and that Irving has had to negotiate to purchase additional water from Dallas, according to Dallas Water Utilities officials. In both cases, timely rains prevented the need to purchase the water.

It's unclear where Irving will go next on implementing permanent restrictions.

The city's communications office did not respond to a request for comment, and Mayor Beth Van Duyne was out of the country and unavailable last week.

But City Manager Tommy Gonzalez warned council members this month that if residents use less water, the city will lose revenue it needs for its water department.

"It's very complex," Gonzalez said. "It's not very easy."

Dallas Water Utilities also expects to lose revenue from conservation. The net impact will be a \$10 million annual loss for a utility that runs on a roughly \$550 million annual budget, said director Jody Puckett.

But Dallas has prepared for many years to enact the conservation measures, she said.

Other utilities might need time to understand the revenue impact of conservation, she said.

"It's a new business model, for lack of a better term," she said.

Puckett expects the twice-weekly restrictions will save the utility 6.8 billion gallons a year. She estimates the utility's customers will use 136.6 billion gallons this fiscal year.

Christie said switching Fort Worth and Arlington to twice-weekly watering would also save billions of gallons. A study is under way to offer a more specific figure, she said.

Meanwhile, Christie is hopeful that all of the cities the Tarrant water district serves will join Dallas in adopting similar restriction plans.

A single plan is important to get residents across the region on the same page, she said. The utilities already share the “Lawn Whisperer” advertising campaign. If cities adopt the same or similar plans, it will make it simpler to understand and cheaper to market, officials with both utilities said.

Rawlings said he understands the frustration some residents feel over the way the restrictions plan is playing out. But just as Dallas was a leader in building water supplies, it must be a leader in conserving them, he said.

“It’s going to save us money, it’s going to be more efficient for government and it’s going to save us the water we need for this region,” he said.

#### AT A GLANCE: Water conservation efforts

In a joint news conference last month, four mayors lined up to pledge their support for permanent twice-weekly watering restrictions across the region. A look at what each said and what their cities have done about water conservation since then:

#### **Dallas Mayor Mike Rawlings**

**What he said:** “We’re asking all the mayors and all the city councils in North Texas to join us in this effort. Imagine if we do this as a region. We can make a huge difference.”

**What his city has done:** The following week, the City Council voted to permanently prohibit residents and businesses from using sprinklers to water lawns and shrubs more than twice a week.

#### **Fort Worth Mayor Betsy Price**

**What she said:** “It’s not a knee-jerk reaction to the drought. We’re here because, drought or no drought, our region’s water supply is simply outpacing the resources that we have. We must take a stand on conservation of water.”

**What her city has done:** The City Council has been briefed but hasn’t yet attempted to vote on restrictions. Political opposition is mixed with concern that restrictions would hurt city revenues.

Price expects council members to be briefed again on a plan in midsummer. But if they ultimately vote, it might not be for twice-weekly restrictions, and there are no guarantees any restriction will pass, she said.

### **Irving Mayor Beth Van Duyne**

**What she said:** “All of our cities have experienced various stages of water restrictions. And yet if you look out today ... there are yards that are absolutely beautiful. And that just shows that even if you only water twice a week, you can sustain great yards.”

**What her city has done:** Nothing to date. City Manager Tommy Gonzalez warned council members earlier this month that if residents use less water, the city will lose revenue it needs for its water department.

### **Arlington Mayor Robert Cluck**

**What he said:** “Eventually we’re going to hit another drought. ... It might be next year, it might be in 10 years, but I wholeheartedly believe in limiting. ... Anything more than twice a week is excessive.”

**What his city has done:** Cluck’s council motion to call a vote on restrictions failed for lack of a second motion after tea party supporters called the plan un-American. Cluck says he still supports restrictions but doesn’t know when he can overcome opposition.

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