

Tighter conservation water rules needed

San Antonio Express News Opinion Piece

By Mike Mecke

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In light of the continuing rapid growth of Bexar County and the San Antonio Water System's customer base, plus the ongoing climate change effects upon our region, we should consider that what is now Stage I should become the “new normal” for SAWS. If our city and region are to continue to prosper economically and if Texas is to be sustainable with its limited water resources, then residents of the San Antonio region must learn to conserve water all the time, not just during a drought.

Also, in any stage of drought restrictions there is no need for wasting water in any type of water fountain. Or in “assuring that the city has green lawns” by irrigation with valuable drinking water. Who are we trying to fool? Landscapes watered with recycled water or with rain water harvesting might be the only exceptions. As all water knowledgeable people know, the cheapest new water is the water you save.

Storm water has been a long-time problem and issue in San Antonio. We need to think out of the box and consider storm water as a valuable resource. I have attended rainwater harvesting conferences in both Tucson and Portland, Ore., where we heard about and visited extraordinary city improvements to storm water systems. City codes were rewritten and such things as curb cuts were made to allow Tucson storm water to flow across broad grassy areas or into parks or golf courses to irrigate landscapes and reduce stream pollution.

A comprehensive Rain Water Harvesting (RWH) program could be very beneficial to our city and its water resources. Starting as Austin and Kerrville have done, with a sponsored rain barrel and RWH workshops program, this could grow into a major conservation asset by reducing the amount of drinking water used on landscape irrigation — about 40 percent of all annual water use. At the same time, storm water runoff is reduced.

We could consider a program such as Santa Fe, N.M., installed some years ago, which requires certain new buildings to have RWH providing landscape irrigation. Also, RWH, with filtering and treatment, used for drinking is very feasible and is being done all across Texas. Rainwater harvest can also be done on large public or office buildings to provide water for restroom flushing, saving even more drinking water.

A permanent goal might be to reduce the acreage of irrigated lawns inside SAWS' service area by, say, 10 percent a year. Xeriscape and wildscape designs should be high on the conservation program mandates.

Landscape use is the largest water use that could be reduced quickly by more intensive conservation targeting. “Brown is Beautiful” fits right along with “Water is Life”.

You think tighter conservation rules and associated programs might hurt city growth or development? Well, what would depleting our water resources do in the future during a very possible multiple-year, intense drought, such as from 1948 to 1957? With even more people than now?

Better safe than sorry. Some innovative ideas should be considered and installed, which could serve SAWS' conservation efforts and help solve storm water issues as well.

Mike Mecke is a retiree of the San Antonio Water System and Texas Water Resources Institute.

Read more: <http://www.mysanantonio.com/opinion/commentary/article/Tighter-conservation-water-rules-needed-3964989.php#ixzz2ENnoScbz>

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