

Water on the Horizon

Long-range Plan Remains a Necessity

By Charlee Beasor

You don't think twice when you flush a toilet, turn a faucet handle, release a spigot or see a sprinkler going. But if water didn't come out the other end, you'd notice. That's a drastic example, but not out of the realm of possibility. Indiana has been blessed with adequate and reliable water resources, but there hasn't been any coordination of those assets on a statewide scale. We could easily get caught dry, wreaking havoc on all aspects of the economy.

For Indiana to thrive economically, a coordinated planning effort is a must.

"Everywhere around the country, states are requiring municipalities to work together with industries and agriculture and other water users to anticipate their growth in water use. We don't do that here; we've never done that," says Jack Wittman, Ph.D., director of geosciences at Bloomington-based engineering and environmental analysis firm Layne Hydro.

"We don't have any system for responding to problems of shortage, nothing that's larger than the individual town. Fortunately it's not been a problem. On the other hand, things like water are never a problem until they're a problem. We have to have a way to react."

Superior infrastructure – and the formation and implementation of a strategic water resource plan – is a key tenant of *Indiana Vision 2025*, the Indiana Chamber of Commerce's economic development roadmap for the state.

Regional splish, splash

Where does our water come from? Surface water and aquifers, mainly.

Indiana as a whole has an abundant amount of water resources. But those resources aren't spread out evenly. Southern Indiana, for instance, with its rolling hills and landscape, has few and narrow aquifers (an underground layer of rock or soil that contains water). And, although Indianapolis is one of the largest cities in the country, it was settled on a relatively small surface water supply – the White River.

Conversely, the Ohio River area and the Great Lakes region give Indiana access to plentiful water resources.

"Because we have access to the resources, we should be using those resources to grow the economy. To do that, we have to get out of this local only thinking. We have to think bigger about water than we ever have in the past," Wittman explains.

Carey Lykins, president and CEO of Citizens Energy Group in Indianapolis, notes that his "dream scenario" would be one where a regional planning initiative could take place.

"It would be my fondest hope that all the players in a given watershed (an area of land that collects and drains water from high points to low points; there are six in Indiana) would come together and engage in joint demand resource planning," Lykins says.

Keeping an eye on the water level

The backbone of a strong economy is energy and water. And while the state has enough

The Ohio River is one of the natural resources serving Indiana, but that does not diminish the need to put a long-range water plan into place (richclarkphoto.com).



natural resources to sustain it, the potential for a drought always exists.

Indiana is actually overdue for a drought, according to the Climate Data Center of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. The state got hit in the 1940s, 1960s and 1980s and each of those droughts was preceded by a significant wet period, which the state just experienced.

Wittman acknowledges that there are regions beginning to hit water limits – not running out of water, but reaching limits – and that planning now could prevent a crisis down the road.

“If we were to expand our vision up one notch: We are the ones with the water, with the ability to produce power, to produce jobs, to produce food. But we can’t do it if every household has to fight each other for the water under their feet. This is a collective action dilemma/problem,” he declares.

Indiana Sen. Beverly Gard (R-Greenfield) agrees. She has championed environmental legislation during her time as a senator (Gard is retiring at the end of her current term).

“It’s going to be a long-term process, to plan on how you do manage these resources. You can’t wait until you have that crisis,” she contends.

A more attractive business climate will result, Gard affirms.

“By having some sort of water management plan, it helps those people who want to come in with economic development plans that might be large water users that want to know if water is going to be available to them and at what cost. It’s an economic driver in this state; having this plan and this resource is very important.”

Through the pipes

Before the dream of more businesses can become a reality, water infrastructure must be assessed and upgraded.

Citizens Energy Group took control of Indianapolis’ water system almost a year ago. Lykins reports that the process is on or ahead of schedule, but that aging infrastructure does pose issues to the local supply getting to where it needs to be.

“(We have) a list of projects that will alleviate those areas of congestion, where we can’t get the water through to meet demand. In a severe situation, which we’ve not had and I cannot predict, if we call for a reduction in demand and demand stays high, we could see a reduction in water pressure, which can create problems, water quality issues and could even end in main breaks if we try to increase the pressure,” he offers.

Money (as always) is the necessary element when it comes to infrastructure, Gard shares.

“That infrastructure is very, very expensive and if you can’t get a grant – and there are far fewer of those than there used to be – customers bear the cost. There’s a limit to what (consumers) can afford.”

Pressure gauge

A recent case that went all the way to the Indiana Supreme Court and required action in the Indiana General Assembly proves the immediate need for action.

The town of Avon in Hendricks County adopted an ordinance that essentially gave it control of all water within 10 miles of its municipal limits.



While other areas of the nation have experienced significant water shortages, Indiana has gone more than 20 years since its last drought. Water supplies, however, are not equal across the state and need to be coordinated with a comprehensive, long-range plan.

“Essentially it said municipalities could control water and the radius outside the corporate limits. The ramifications would have been profound had we not dealt with that,” Gard expresses. “If you drew concentric circles of 10-mile radius around communities, in some communities there would be seven overlapping jurisdictions.”

She authored Senate Bill 132, which addressed the issue and was signed into law earlier this year.

The bill also brings the needed statewide plan one step closer to reality. There are 824 water utilities and 531 wastewater utilities in the state and only a fraction of those are regulated by the Indiana Utility Regulatory Commission (IURC). The law doesn’t regulate those unregulated utilities, but requires the IURC to collect information concerning the operations and water use of every water utility in the state – regulated or unregulated.

“In SB 132, there are reporting requirements for them. We want to know how much (water) they withdraw, the source of the water, who their customers are. And we want to know things like whether they are looking ahead at their water resources, their long-range planning,” Gard affirms.

In the (water) works

Texas could prove to be an example for Indiana to follow – even though the water resources in the two states are starkly different. The Texas Water Development Board (TWDB) works to anticipate future demand and provide necessary planning for water development in the state.

“Texas is one of the interesting examples. They are the job producers. If you look at the country right now, Texas and Oklahoma (which has a similar board) are producing jobs. They are the leaders in water supply planning and it’s not accidental or coincidental. They’ve figured out if they’re going to grow jobs, they have to supply water,” Wittman acknowledges.

Gard – while not advocating for a similar water board in Indiana – offers that a current state agency could step in.

“I do think that there is a role for some existing state agency to be more involved in monitoring water use, evaluating large withdrawals of water and the negative impact on existing water users. Maybe that would be best under the (Department of Natural Resources).”

Regardless of who takes on the responsibility, Wittman emphasizes that it needs to get done.

“This is definitely not a thing you can let everyone fend for themselves,” he asserts. “(We need this) to tie us together and protect our economy. This is about jobs and protecting our future.”