

Potential new MWRA members

By Robert L. Zimmerman, Jr. / Special To The Tab
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Water, growth and the MWRA

The Massachusetts Water Resources Authority is responsible for distributing water to 42 greater Boston communities. The reservoirs that provide this water, Quabbin and Wachusett, and surrounding watershed lands are under the stewardship of the state Department of Conservation and Recreation. In creating the MWRA, the legislature split off responsibility for the management of the natural resource from the delivery of this water.

Thanks to aggressive leak repair and conservation in the 1980s, MWRA communities are using 100 million gallons less daily than 25 years ago. Today MWRA is selling 225 mgd of wholesale water to local water departments of its member cities and towns, down from a high of 342 mgd. The MWRA believes it now has extra water available and it is looking for new customers. Expensive projects like the Deer Island sewage plant and the 17-mile MetroWest Tunnel between routes I-495 and 128 have left the MWRA with a pile of debt. Funded by bonds, the debt service will continue to rise through 2011 and then taper off.

About 60 percent of the MWRA's budget currently goes to pay off this debt. The MWRA needs more revenue to meet these debts and rising energy costs. Double-digit increases in existing customer water rates are projected over the next several years as these costs rise.

Consequently, the MWRA Board, in a major shift, is proposing to treat water as a commodity, expand the MWRA service area and actively market this water to new communities. The sale of more water would purportedly help reduce projected increases in wholesale water rates through admission fees and by spreading the costs among more cities and towns. Additionally, a growing number of communities between the Route 128 and Interstate 495 beltway face water shortages over the coming decade. New MWRA supplies could help alleviate the problem. However, making more water available to new customers triggers a host of concerns that need to be evaluated carefully by the MWRA Board, state regulators and the public. It is unlikely that new water sales will materially reduce MWRA bond debt in the near term, or significantly curtail the cost of water for current customers. MWRA estimates that even if all of the 20 communities it has identified as potential customers (including Holliston, Medway, Franklin and Milford in the Charles watershed) joined - a dubious supposition given high MWRA fees and rates and lack of enthusiasm by these towns - rate increases would only shrink by 3 to 4 percent.

Before selling more water the MWRA needs to revisit the "safe yield," or the maximum, dependable withdrawals that can safely be made from MWRA reservoirs without damaging the water resource. The original methodology for determining this did not sufficiently take into account the water necessary for downstream flow and

fisheries' health. The re-determination of safe yield must also consider the effects of global warming, as well as the growth needs of the existing MWRA service area.

New sources of water spur new growth. The MWRA water sales will play a major role in where and how growth occurs in eastern Massachusetts. Stoughton, a recent MWRA member, has experienced an explosion of new development. Water sales need to be paired with Smart Growth approaches, which reduce sprawl and open space losses and promote denser, low-impact development. The metropolitan area needs to encourage mixed-use village density zones, transportation-oriented development, and the redevelopment of brownfields for commercial and residential uses. Linking the sale of new water to a Smart Growth agenda can help create the kind of housing and amenities that will make Massachusetts attractive to industry, stabilize housing prices, and reduce the number of cars on the road.

While MWRA water can help alleviate the stress on water resources in the Ipswich and the upper Charles basins, selling water to communities without adequate planning is not an environmental benefit and could backfire, by enabling low density, high impact residential development, which uses vastly greater quantities of water, and paving over more ground, which prevents aquifer recharge.

Communities seeking to join the MWRA will want to buy the water during the summer, when local supplies are most stressed. There would be little reason for these communities to conserve water or to build the kind of stormwater and wastewater infrastructure that will replenish aquifers while restoring river flow and reducing flash flooding during rainstorms.

Selling water based on demand alone will result in greater sprawl and unchecked development in the wrong places. Before expanding, a full environmental impact review, like that required under state law for any major project, should first be performed to analyze all aspects of expansion.

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These are communities in proximity to MWRA that may have water deficits now or in the future, and could consider MWRA as an option to supplement current water sources (list does not include communities that are actively pursuing admission to MWRA).

- Boston Harbor South:
- Hingham/Hull
- Sharon
- Ipswich River Basin:
- Salem/Beverly
- Ipswich
- Wenham
- Topsfield
- Danvers/Middleton
- Lynnfield Center W.D.
- Upper Charles:
- Franklin
- Holliston

- Medway
- Milford
- SUASCO:
- Ashland
- Hopkinton
- Nashua:
- Boylston
- Lancaster
- Sterling
- West Boylston
- Connecticut:
- South Hadley Fire District #2

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