

World of Water

Time to Move Forward on Resource Plan



Jack Wittman, Ph.D.

Since 2014, when I had the opportunity to work with the Indiana Chamber of Commerce (and many additional stakeholders) on its water resources study, there have been frequent discussions and activities. As we enter 2018, it's time for additional analysis and actions on this important topic.

The in-depth report was titled *Water and Economic Development in Indiana: Modernizing the State's Approach to a Critical Resource*. The following was a portion of the recommendations:

"Beyond flood conditions, Indiana has never before needed to actively manage water resources. That is no longer true. Changes in water use and natural limits on availability need to be explained to the public. The only way for Indiana to grow economically and demographically is to manage the critical resource that supports industry, power generators, ecosystems, agriculture and drinking water supplies.

"Failure to properly plan for increasing demands in growing parts of the state may create significant water supply challenges. Educating farmers, local government, conservation and business leaders on the need for responsible water planning and use is a necessary step to long-term water security in Indiana."

Some progress on collecting additional data has taken place in subsequent legislative sessions, with Sen. Ed Charbonneau (R-Valparaiso) leading the way on those efforts. While that is a positive step, not much has changed in the way the agencies involved manage water resources.

Looking ahead

Recently, however, Gov. Holcomb included water in his list of priorities for the coming legislative session. The state is working to coordinate strategies to both manage water resources and replace aging infrastructure. And, given the importance of water to our economy, the Indiana Chamber continues to identify it as a topic that needs attention to sustain economic development.

Interest remains widespread throughout the state. Agricultural land is assessed at a higher value if well irrigated. Some major economic development projects are not going to happen in certain areas of the country due to water resource questions. Indiana could be a beneficiary if a thorough state plan is in place.

Many other states are grappling with the same issues and the same needs. Most have developed water planning programs to help make decisions with high-quality data and a new level of local control. New Jersey and Connecticut each just completed its first modern state water plans. Virginia is making changes to its approach to regulating withdrawals from the state's aquifers. Arkansas and South Carolina have established regional planning entities to focus attention on the right challenges and opportunities.

Fortunately for elected officials, water resource protection and water infrastructure improvement have broad public support. A recent survey from Stanford University shows majority backing for additional government attention to water supply and water quality.

Changing times

New uses of water help our economy only if we know how to manage the resources to satisfy changing needs. A recent report about the Ohio River Basin, funded by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, suggests that central and southern Indiana are likely to have longer dry spells each summer and autumn in the next several decades. Water resources and infrastructure in the state were not designed for this more variable climate.

In 2017, leaders of a community water system in southern Indiana considered drilling new wells in a neighboring county and piping the groundwater back to serve its customers. When this idea was presented in a public meeting, it was not immediately known by local officials whether this pipeline was allowed without formal review and approval. Clarity is needed in order to make informed decisions.

The ultimate solution here is not a one-size-fits-all system. Water users must be empowered to manage resources collectively. The job of the state is to facilitate the work and provide information so that regional and local entities can manage according to their priorities.

People sometimes ask if we are in a water crisis. The answer today might be "No." But a change in natural conditions (beyond our control) or a lack of action (well within our determination) will force a different response. We must choose to plot our course strategically instead of having to make difficult decisions under duress.

It is time for Indiana to move forward and become the best possible stewards of its water resources. It is another of the important parts of the equation of being a "state that works."

AUTHOR: Jack Wittman, Ph.D., based in Bloomington, is principal geoscientist with INTERA Incorporated. He was the author of the 2014 study, available at www.indianachamber.com/water, and continues to work with Indiana leaders on effectively utilizing water resources