

Water Conservation Design Team for Madison Water Utility

Looking out over our city's vast and beautiful lakes it is hard to believe that we need to be talking about water quantity. There's a lot of water in our lakes! Water quality concerns – of our lakes and of our drinking water – have dominated headlines of late, but concerns over our drinking water *quantity* stored in aquifers below ground have risen as groundwater levels fall. As concerns over our water supply increase Madison is taking the first necessary steps toward a comprehensive community water conservation plan.

Beneath our city water levels in the deep aquifer have fallen 60 feet and continue to drop. In parts of the state where groundwater levels have dropped even more, like Waukesha and Green Bay, these falling levels have directly impacted the quality and safety of the drinking water. The water we see in our lakes and streams can not be hydrologically separated from the water that remains unseen in the ground beneath our feet. As we deplete our groundwater we are directly affecting our surface waters as well, drying up springs and, in parts of the state, impacting water levels in lakes, rivers and wetlands. By using water more efficiently we will be protecting the lakes we see, use and love as well as the long term public safety of our drinking water.

Conserving our water resources by reducing our water usage will be a key to sustaining our quality of life and economic development. Citizens have made it clear that water conservation is a high priority for them. As a result, the Water Utility has formed a Water Conservation Program Design Team that is made up of utility representatives, other city staff, interested citizens and commercial/industrial representatives. This group is tasked with coming up with a plan that will promote efficient and sustainable water use.

Changes to water rate structures that encourage conservation are on many people's minds. It may be that the time has come for Madison to implement so-called conservation rates, but these rates, by themselves, are unlikely to produce significant results. Waukesha was the first community in the state to implement conservation rates, but they did so only as a part of a conservation plan that sets a goal of reducing per capita water usage 20% by 2020. Waukesha's water utility reports that, less than two years after adopting the plan, they are already seeing significant reductions in water consumption.

Designing a water conservation program for the city does not require re-inventing the wheel. Many communities across the country have done so. We must take a hard look at what has been done elsewhere and decide whether those conservation practices are appropriate or feasible here in Madison. In addition to conservation rates the design team will be looking at increasing education and outreach effectiveness, sprinkling ordinances, increasing the frequency of billing, reducing leaks, rebates for water efficient appliances and many other practices that have significant potential to reduce our water consumption.

The water utility and the design team are committed to making sure that Madison is at the forefront of water conservation in the state for the long term sustainability of our water resources, quality of life and economic development. We welcome your input as we work to conserve our valuable and vulnerable water resources.

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