

Study dredges up water worries

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When it comes to water use, Scituate is fast approaching its withdrawal limit. So says a recent study of the town's drinking water conducted by Comprehensive Environmental Incorporated.

Eileen Pannetier, the president of the Milton-based environmental planning group told selectmen last week that Scituate residents and businesses currently use 1.68 million gallons of water per day, a number quickly nearing the DEP's daily water usage permit limit for Scituate of 1.73 million gallons per day. And additional housing developments could well put the town over its limit.

Pannetier recommended the dredging of both the Old Oaken Bucket Pond and the town's reservoir — across Route 3A from Tack Factory Pond — to address the problem.

"You are almost at the permit limit," said Pannetier. "You're at the limit of development too."

Pannetier said with an average

of 2.64 persons per household, each of whom consumes about 80 gallons of water per day, the town will reach its permitted daily water withdrawal limit with the construction of 237 more units — residential or commercial.

With proposed developments for hundreds of units currently in the planning stages in town, Pannetier said officials should take a close look at measures to both increase the town's water supply, and slow down its growth until more water can be accessed.

If a town were to exceed its permitted limit, the Department of Environmental Protection would issue a consent order asking the town to remedy the situation, said Pannetier.

The issue has been one of great concern to Selectmen Chairman Joseph Norton.

"This is very important for the future of this town," said Selectmen Chairman Joseph Norton. "We are within a couple hundred homes of our [water

withdrawal] limit.”

Norton recommended that each and every development that comes before the different boards in town should be closely examined, to prevent reaching the water withdrawal limit or reaching it before adequate measures have been taken.

“I don’t care if it’s a million dollar house or a 40-B,” he said. “It’s still a unit.”

He added that the construction of future developments — either residential or commercial — will mean a sacrifice by current residents.

We’ll be doing water bans to put in new homes, he said.

Pannetier said the town reservoir naturally feeds water into Old Oaken Bucket Pond, where it is then accessed and treated by the town treatment plant, and then piped throughout the town. The water system is bolstered by five active wells which are connected to the system from their locations around town, and one more which adds directly to the treatment plant’s supply.

Pannetier said dredging both the Old Oaken Bucket Pond and the town reservoir — the primary water source for the town — would increase the supply and help meet the growing demand. Clearing sediment from the floor of Old Oaken Bucket Pond could add about eight million gallons per day to the town’s supply she said, and an additional 62 million more gallons could be gained from the reservoir if it is dredged.

In order for a body of water to be dredged, Pannetier said it must first be disconnected from the town’s water supply system. She recommended dredging Old Oaken Bucket Pond first because with that project completed, the water supply of the expanded pond would be enough to support the town’s water needs when the much larger reservoir is taken offline to be dredged.

Pannetier said the Old Oaken Bucket Pond project would require at least two or three years for permitting, and then one or two more years to complete the project, with a total price-tag of about \$700,000. Dredging the reservoir a few years down the road would cost the town an esti-

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mated \$5 million, she said.

Pannetier said another option for the town could be the implementation of a water balance program — like those in Weymouth and Hingham — where developers must provide water conservation to match their water demands so current supplies last longer.

“The way it’s been done in these other communities has been through conservation opportunities,” said Pannetier, who gave an example of a developer who would pay for leak detection services within the water system, in order to tie into it.

Pannetier said CEI also looked at other ways to increase the town’s groundwater sites, and other surface water options including desalinization or purchasing water from other communities. The water could be piped in through existing inter-connecting pipes that link various towns — and are used mainly during emergencies, but because other communities are running low on water as well, Pannetier said dredging is the most viable option for Scituate.

Scituate Water Division Supervisor Gene Babin said desalinization and water conservation efforts would be positive for the town, and should not be ignored, but agreed that dredging the two bodies of water is the way to go first.

“That’s the one activity that would give the greatest yield in water increase,” he said

Babin said a build-up of sediment has clouded the bottom of the reservoir, and it needs to be dredged anyway, regardless of the water supply issue, so going through with the clean-up would

benefit the town on two fronts.

Selectman Paul Reidy said he was concerned with the figures that CEI used in their study. During the summer months Reidy said the town’s population increases from 18,000 to 28,000 and he wanted to make sure this jump was taken into consideration in the group’s numbers.

Pannetier said CEI used US census numbers that list Scituate’s general population at 17,863 residents in their study, and although water usage certainly increases in the summer months, a town receives its water permit based on the average daily use over the course of the year.

“Summer use patterns are difficult to pinpoint,” she said. Most of the increased water use, she added, comes from residents watering their lawns and flowers, or washing their cars — and if necessary can be controlled by water restrictions.

Reidy said people who aren’t adding to the need for water — current residents and business owners — shouldn’t be compelled to pay for it. He added that he doesn’t want the issue to go unresolved until the town has reached its maximum withdrawal of water, and is then forced into making a decision to dredge or not to dredge, or some other measures that they could voluntarily do now.

Lance Van Lenten Director of the First Herring Brook Watershed Initiative, which recently completed its 3-year study of the town’s supply of surface drinking water, said the town should strongly consider not only the amount of units in a proposed development, but also the location. Where a development is built, he said is as important — if not more — than the number of units going in. As part of the study, Van Lenten said the group discovered 16 streams that were either unmarked or not marked clearly — so site locations should be closely examined before they’re approved.

Town Administrator Richard Agnew said he would talk with the town counsel about putting a growth control mechanism into the zoning bylaws that would limit the amount of new units the town allows to be constructed each year, to a number that would keep Scituate under its water withdrawal limit.