

The Water District Plans – One Year Later: Implementation and Ongoing Planning

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Abstract. In the fall of 2003, three years of planning resulted in the adoption of three (3) water resource management plans for the 16-county Metropolitan Atlanta Region. The majority of the tasks identified in these plans are to be implemented by local governments at the local level. This paper will focus on the District's role in the implementation of the plans, the ongoing nature of the planning process, and lessons that can be learned from the District's experiences. Specific points include: Georgia EPD's implementation guidelines, the District's Plan Amendment Process, the District's mandatory annual review and reporting processes.

INTRODUCTION

In 2001, the Georgia General Assembly created the Metropolitan North Georgia Water Planning District to preserve and protect water resources in a 16-county area surrounding metropolitan Atlanta (Bartow, Cherokee, Clayton, Cobb, Coweta, DeKalb, Douglas, Fayette, Forsyth, Fulton, Gwinnett, Hall, Henry, Paulding, Rockdale, and Walton counties). In its first three years, the District established its organizational structure and developed three major plans to guide water resource management decisions. These plans, adopted in September 2003, provide District jurisdictions and state officials with recommendations for actions, policies and investments for watershed protection, wastewater treatment and water supply and water conservation management. Georgia EPD is statutorily required to ensure that local governments in the District implement the District's plans. Since the adoption of the plans the District has worked to ensure that local governments are aware of the requirements of the District plans, and that they have the necessary tools to begin to implement the plans.

IMPLEMENTATION AT THE DISTRICT

The District's plans are implemented primarily at the local level. Much of the work that takes place at the District involves technical assistance and training to local governments as they began to implement relevant

provisions of the plans. This assistance is provided for each of the three District plans.

District-wide Watershed Management Plan

To assist with local implementation of the model stormwater management ordinances required by the plan, the District conducted eight full-day seminars in locations around the 16-county area. Also in 2004, the District, in cooperation with the Georgia Water and Pollution Control Association (GW&PCA) and ARC, co-hosted a series of eight two-day courses on the Georgia Stormwater Management Manual for local government staff.

The District's technical committee finalized standards and methods for water quality monitoring and developed operations and management guidelines to help local governments develop their stormwater programs. Lastly, the District presented a NPDES Phase II MS4 Stormwater Program Workshop for local government staff.

Long-term Wastewater Management Plan

Wastewater flows within the District are expected to nearly double over the next 30 years. To address these needs the plan anticipates a future of large, high-performance treatment facilities that produce reusable water. The plan also intends more intensive management of public wastewater collections systems and privately owned septic systems.

In 2004, the District facilitated a seminar for local governments on septic tank issues. Septic systems in Georgia are governed by O.C.G.A. § 290-5-26, "On-Site Sewage Management Systems," administered by the Department of Human Resources (DHR). DHR staff spoke on numerous septic tank topics including proper siting, design, and construction of septic tanks, steps to improve maintenance requirements, and the state's effort to develop a septic system database. Other topics discussed at the seminar included incorporating septic systems into wastewater planning and enacting local policies for private wastewater systems.

Since the adoption of the District's Plan Amendment Guidelines, the District's Executive Committee has

reviewed several requests to modify the Long-term Wastewater Management Plan. Most of these requests have been for relatively minor modifications to the plan and these minor changes to the plan have been accepted by the committee after the public review and comment period. (see following section on Plan Amendment process).

The District is also coordinating an analysis of nitrogen water quality samples to assist local governments that discharge to the Chattahoochee River. This effort will help assess the nitrogen contribution from wastewater treatment plants.

Water Supply and Water Conservation Plan

Water demands in the District are expected to nearly double over the next 30 years. To address these needs and maximize our use of this limited resource, the plan contains an aggressive water conservation program that is estimated to save 11% over the life of the plan.

Implementation of the District's water conservation measures will require actions by both utilities and consumers. The District conducted a number of education and training activities to assist with these requirements.

The District hosted a Water Conservation Rates Workshop to help utilities prepare to meet the new, three-tiered water conservation rate. An inventory of the area's use of water conserving rate structures was conducted through a survey of water and wastewater rates in the 16-county area. The District also held a seminar on leak detection technologies and methodologies to help water providers in conducting system water audits and reduce leakage. In the legislative arena, the District secured the passage of 2004 HB 1277 which will require rain sensor shut-off switches on new landscape irrigation systems.

Lastly, assessment of the District's progress in reaching its water conservation goals is critical. To assist in this assessment, the District has formed a Technical Subcommittee of the Water Supply utility managers which will continue to evaluate the Plan and the conservation measures.

Education and Public Awareness

In addition to technical assistance and training education and public awareness is an activity that the District is uniquely qualified to perform. The District currently has an Education Subcommittee that works with local governments in the District to provide education to targeted groups and the general public on both water quality and water conservation topics. This committee meets every other month and provides the staff guidance in the implementation of the District's two education campaigns: The Clean Water Campaign, which focuses on water quality issues and Water Use It Wisely, which focuses on water conservation. Both campaigns

have mass media elements as well as more local, civic-oriented programs.

In 2004, the District's efforts included over 600 television PSAs, dozens of billboard advertisements, and the distribution of thousands of brochures and materials. It is estimated that the public awareness campaign reached over four million residents in metro Atlanta. In addition to the media campaign, the District hosted dozens of workshops in the region reaching thousands of residents with more targeted messages that included awareness of the issues and specific activities that could be taken to address the problems.

Measuring the success of the District's education and public awareness efforts is an important component of the District's work. For the past four years the Clean Water Campaign has conducted an annual poll of individuals to gauge the effectiveness of the campaign. In 2004, this polling was expanded to include information about the Water Use It Wisely Campaign. Through this polling the District is able to evaluate the effectiveness of the messages contained in the campaigns.

Federal Grant Research

The District also actively works with its local governments to secure federal funding for infrastructure projects in the District. The District has been working with the Congressional Delegation for three years and has been able to secure \$2.7 million in federal funding for these projects. Although this figure is small relative to the size of these projects, the ability to get additional funds in future appropriations appears to be promising.

EPD PLAN IMPLEMENTATION GUIDELINES

The District's plans contain a wide variety of strategies and requirements that are to be implemented by local governments. Georgia EPD is responsible for ensuring that these requirements are implemented. The primary mechanism that EPD uses is its permitting authority (In addition to permitting, EPD also has the ability to withhold state grants and loans for failure to comply with the plans). To ensure that both local officials understand how Georgia EPD will enforce these requirements, and to ensure that EPD staff understands how these requirements are to be enforced, the District has been assisting EPD in the development of a set plan implementation guidelines. These guidelines will be a concise summary of the specific actions that EPD will be evaluating when reviewing water related permit applications from local governments in the District. A draft set of guidelines have been reviewed by the District's Technical Coordinating Committee (TCC) and Basin Advisory Councils (BACs). Once approved by

EPD, these guidelines will be used by EPD when issuing water related permits.

PLAN AMENDMENT PROCESS

Water resource plans are not ‘static’ documents that are set-in-stone the day they are approved. Planning is a dynamic process and from time-to-time plans may need to be amended. In June 2004, the District Board adopted a set of Plan Amendment Guidelines which provides a process where the District will consider proposed amendments prior to the District’s mandatory 5-year update to the plans. This process will allow local governments to continue to plan and provide the necessary services for their citizens while ensuring that major changes are held for the plan review and update process.

Once a proposed amendment is submitted, the District’s Executive Committee reviews each request and categorizes the amendment as: (1) administrative, (2) minor, or (3) major. Depending on the category selected, each proposed amendment will result in one of the following actions: (1) adoption by the Committee, (2) a second review by the Committee following a 15-day period of public comment, or (3) the amendment will be held for consideration during the District’s plan review and update process. In 2004, the District adopted six (6) minor amendments to the Long-term Wastewater Management Plan.

PLAN REVIEW SURVEY OF LOCAL GOVERNMENTS IMPLEMENTATION

The District’s plans contain a number of local government implementation activities that are scheduled to occur over the next 30 years. The District is required to review these implementation activities and report to the Director of EPD on the District’s progress in meeting these goals on an annual basis. As part of this reporting, staff surveyed the implementation activities of its members and has compiled this information into its *2004 Activities and Progress Report* and its comprehensive *2004 Water District Plan Implementation Review* report.

This information was collected through a Plan Implementation Questionnaire that was sent to more than one hundred (100) local governments and authorities in the District. The questionnaire focused on activities that were scheduled for 2004. As part of this process, local jurisdictions were also encouraged to elaborate on other plan implementation activities (those scheduled for 2005 or later) they had initiated. The questionnaire was divided into three sections covering each of the three District plans.

In total, 91 jurisdictions participated in the survey. The responding jurisdictions represent 97 percent of the

District population and 94 percent of the District land area. This level of participation provided the District with significant information about progress being made at the local level toward the goal of ensuring adequate supplies of drinking water, protecting water quality and minimizing the impacts of development on the District’s watersheds and downstream communities.

LESSONS LEARNED

During the development and implementation of the plans the District learned several lessons that should be noted as the state begins its efforts to develop a statewide water plan.

First and foremost, it is extremely important that the statewide plan have the significant water users in the various regions of the state take leadership roles in the development of any sub-state/regional plans. In the case of the District, the most significant water users are local governments, who are also the directly elected representatives of the citizens in their communities. The leadership structure in other regions may not be this “clean”, but efforts should be made to have significant users take leadership positions. This will give “ownership” of the process to these users which will ultimately help to ensure that the plans can be implemented, which is the ultimate goal of any planning process.

An additional lesson that is related to leadership involves funding of the District and its plans. The significant water users in the District, local governments, provide two thirds of the funding for the District’s work. (Roughly 1/3 comes from state appropriations). By having a direct financial stake in the operation of the District, local governments’ ownership of the process was reinforced which in turn increased the prospect of successful plan implementation.

CONCLUSION

Water resource planning is an activity that doesn’t happen every five years. It is an activity that must continue year-round if the implementation of the plans is to be successful. The District has two primary roles in this planning. First the District continues to work with and support the implementation activities of its local governments. Second, the District reviews and reports on these implementation activities to determine what activities ‘work’ and what activities don’t. Through this monitoring the District will be better prepared to make the necessary modification during the required 5-year plan amendment process. It is crucial that this planning process continue; the region’s potential growth and quality of life depend on it.