



Times-News

Drought's Causes, Solutions Within Our Control

Monday, August 18, 2008

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ECO NOTES



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Years ago, I traveled to the Bay of Fundy (near Nova Scotia) to see the magical tide come in and out. Here is one of the few places in the world where the tide rolls out and the ocean literally disappears before your eyes. For miles and miles all one can see are flopping fish and shells and what used to be the sea, until high tide arrives and 100 billion tons of seawater rushes back to retake its turf.

This summer, I spent some time at a nearby lake bordering South Carolina that is currently 13 feet below its median level. Coves throughout the lake are so dry that the muck surrounding hundreds of abandoned boats has dried and tall grasses have overtaken what was once a mighty lake. There are no tides to retake Lake Hartwell, and the lake continues to drop.

Our region faces a drought of unprecedented proportions with little relief in sight. According to North Carolina's Chief Climatologist, Ryan Boyles, WNC's conditions are so dry that it will take several seasons for it to get back to normal. According to Boyles, drought is not just a function of lack of rain, but is greatly impacted by man's influence on water resources. Communities that protect their watersheds are not impacted by rain shortages as severely as areas having little controls on their natural heritage.

Our waterways are like an organism, with a circulatory system that distributes nutrients, a filtration system to eliminate toxins and a system to uptake oxygen to feed dependent ecosystems (including people) that rely on its future integrity. When that system fails, we need to all pull together to heal the wound. If our neighbor was hemorrhaging blood, would we demand blood transfusions first, like some of our policymakers are asking for, or would we first stop the loss of blood that has forced EMS to our doorstep? Our neighbor, the Mills River, is suffering, and being good stewards of our watershed, the city has chosen to stop the bleeding. We all suffer when precious resources like water are in short supply. Man has no power to create water. We do, however, have the power to control the wise use of it.

Naturally, when a resource seems unending, little thought is given to conservation. Our drought for the past two years has been a wakeup call. We can no longer act as if our natural heritage is a bottomless well. Now is the time to protect it. Our liquid neighbor needs rehabilitation, or rather how we use it does.

First off, we all must come to the aid of our neighbor. How can we cut back on our use of water and be more conscious of its capacity? I won't include my usual "top ten" list in this column, but you can find a useful list of tips under the City of Hendersonville website at: www.cityofhendersonville.org.

Next, what controls can we put into place to monitor and limit overuse of water? The City of Hendersonville has never denied a county development a hookup to city water, according to Lee Smith, the Utilities Manager. Maybe it's time the city starts investigating at what point enough is enough. In the course of the City's development of its new Comprehensive Plan, isn't it time to include a growth strategy that provides limitations on water?

Our Board of County Commissioners have their own Comprehensive Plan that needs dusting off. This award-winning plan clearly restricts bringing major infrastructure like public water to the Rural/Agricultural Areas, our rural communities, so that we protect our rural spaces. Interestingly enough, the same commissioners who are jumping up and down for a water transfusion from the French Broad River, which itself is on life-support, are the same ones who approved bringing city water to Cobblestone Village, to Bearallow Mountain and to Pinnacle Falls in direct violation of our Comprehensive Plan. Maybe its time to require every new development do a Water Impact Statement. In addition, shouldn't we require all new developments have a grey water system or some other water retention policies that recycle water and limit its overuse?

If the city and county were run like any business intending to remain solvent, it would never consider tapping resources already in short supply until it understood the limits on those resources. It would study the issue, have water experts issue a report and put protocols in place to implement the recommendations. Now might be a good time to put our conservative values in place to protect the solvency of our community.

For those interested in learning more about water quality and water management, ECO in conjunction with Cooperative Extension is offering a six week Water Quality Master Class run by our county's water guru, Diane Silver. The series begins this Tuesday at the Hendersonville Public Library and continues at various locations in the county on most subsequent Tuesdays. To register for the course or get more information, please log on at www.eco-wnc.org.

In order to encourage water conservation, ECO is holding a water conservation contest. Show us how much water you are saving (through water bills) since the water restrictions were put in effect and you could win a free rain barrel. Runner-ups will receive a water conservation kit. To enter, mail, fax or email us your August water bill and your September bill. The winner will be announced in future columns.

Finally, become a steward of our watersheds and natural heritage by joining ECO's Water Quality and Green Infrastructure Committees. Water Quality meets the second Wednesday of the month and Green Infrastructure meets this coming August 21st, both at 4:30 at the ECO office.

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