A Fresh Look at Water

MOST OF US TAKE DRAWING A GLASS OF COOL WATER from our faucet or stepping into a hot shower for granted. If you live in Barrington Hills, or any of the surrounding communities, you know that your water probably comes from a well.

If you live in Barrington proper, your water comes from the village municipal system which also draws its water from wells drilled into the same local aquifers.

For the past 200 years we've used this underground aquifer reliably and with little thought to sustainability. That is, until recently.

A number of recent studies show that we are stressing the ground water aquifers around the Chicago region. In fact, water supplies from all sources, including Lake Michigan and the Fox River, are under stress.

The most notable studies are:

- The 3-dimensional ground water mapping done by the Barrington Area Council of Governments
- The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) regional water supply report
- The Metropolitan Planning Council water supply report.

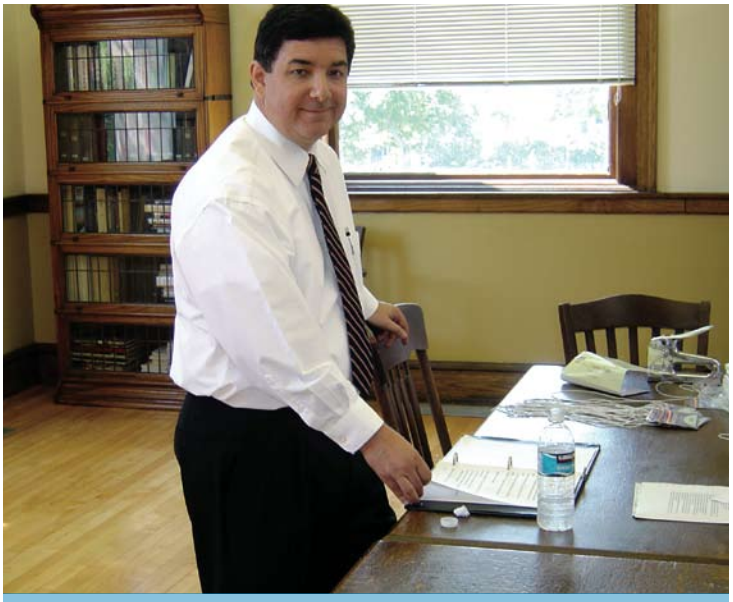
All of these reports point to the same conclusion: As we grow population, we are using water at a rate that is not sustainable. Thus, groundwater supplies cannot be guaranteed beyond 2050.

Though 2050 sounds like a very long time from now, this is barely a blink of an eye in the utility and infrastructure building worlds. Water and electric utilities routinely plan for 50-year time frames. The roads, power, and water systems you use today were planned and built decades ago.

These reports suggest we must begin to make changes to the way we use, recharge, and protect the aquifers that have supplied us all these years. Many people think the water we use is primordial and comes from deep underground reservoirs of ancient glacial water. This is not the case in the Barrington area. Our ground water is supplied from surface water seeping and filtering into the shallow aquifers, typically 150 feet deep. This water is anywhere from months to decades old.

Community leaders including mayors, members of industry, and specialists from government and academia have been meeting to discuss how we will address these issues. The focus is on water use and well management, waste water management, and aquifer protection and recharge through low-density zoning and storm water management.

We need to address the basic governance issue: Should we manage water issues locally, regionally, state wide, at the federal level, or not at all? Most of us prefer local management of resource and community issues to minimize the impact of "outside big government". Yet problems like ground water will



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demand significant dollars and resources for research and management. The expense and expertise required are beyond the capacity of many local governments. Additionally, aquifers do not respect any boundaries. That means communities must work together.

Therefore, we can expect that regional pacts will form made up of local jurisdictions. The model for this strategy is the council of government, such as the Barrington Area Council of Governments. Several councils might become allies to work on solutions specific to their own region.

The Barrington Area Council of Governments has been active on this issue for nearly a decade, including working with other COGs. Most recently, the council delivered a state-of-the-art ground water survey assessing some 100,000 lines of data from 27,000 well logs covering 600 square miles. The study analyzes the ground strata every five feet from surface to bedrock. This kind of effort could not have been accomplished by any one community.

The most important aspect of this issue will be to refrain from overly politicizing it. There will most certainly be the temptation for turf battles, accusations of conspiracy, and political action committees, much as there was over the fluoridation of municipal water in the 1950s and 60s. While the science and technology will be daunting, the real challenge will be whether, and how, we choose to work together as communities with a common goal: plentiful clean fresh water today and long into the future.