

Too much, too little, too toxic

By Joe Nathanson

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A recent order from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has placed strict deadlines on two Baltimore City projects that have been limping along at an unacceptable pace. This involves two city reservoirs, Druid Lake, located at the southern edge of Druid Hill Park, and Lake Ashburton reservoir, also situated in northwest Baltimore.

The EPA mandate calls for the completion, by year's end, of covering over these reservoirs to protect them from natural or manmade contaminants and assure a safe supply of drinking water for the city and region.

Concerns about water, whether too much, too little, or too dirty, will increasingly impact land use and development in the years and decades ahead. Examples of the challenges associated with the quality, availability, or overabundance of water are found from coast to coast.

Draught in the West

Out in the western U.S., some thorny issues brought about by years of severe draught will soon come to a head. The Colorado River is drying up, with drastic consequences for a seven-state region.

Most affected are the three Lower Basin states of California, Nevada and Arizona, with great dependence on the river flows, not only for supplying water to residential users and vast acreage of agricultural land, but also for hydroelectric power serving nearly six million homes as well as thousands of business users.

The involved states, including the Upper Basin states of Wyoming, Colorado, Utah and New Mexico, are facing an end of May deadline to come to an agreement to sharply curtail their intake of Colorado River waters. Failing that, the U.S. secretary of the interior has the authority to reduce water consumption of some jurisdictions by upwards of 20 percent. Depending on the precise contours of a resolution, many questions will come to the fore. In Arizona, for example, Phoenix has been one of the fastest-growing metropolitan areas in the country, with tens of thousands of new homes slated for construction on its outer

fringes. It's not clear that this development, stretching out into the desert, can actually come about with greatly reduced water resources.

The impacts of the water restrictions will not be limited to the West. High water-consuming crops, from almond groves to alfalfa for cattle feed, will come under pressure. The rising costs of fresh produce will be felt nationwide.

Ocean's fury

Earlier this month we learned of another type of interaction between land and water – and a dramatic one at that. On the outer banks of North Carolina, in the small beach town of Rodanthe on Hatteras Island, the Atlantic Ocean has claimed another home. It was the fourth such home lost to the ocean waves since the beginning of last year.

The continued erosion of the beach and rising sea levels can only mean more homes at risk. There have been calls for beach replenishment, but the costs are far beyond what could be supported by the local tax base. State and federal dollars are not coming to the rescue.

Some property owners have responded by moving their homes further inland, at a cost of hundreds of thousands of dollars. But, with continued rising seas due to climate change, this only buys time for a while. And, what of the cost of insuring these properties, when insurance is even available?

Safe drinking water

Keeping matters in perspective, the Baltimore area's immediate challenges should be manageable.

Once the city completes the capping of the drinking water portion of the Druid Lake reservoir, it can turn its attention toward wrapping up the work on an urban amenity: the adjoining water body that will be available for recreational boating, kayaking and related pursuits.

That is not to make light of other issues related to our water and wastewater system, including the ongoing problems at the Back River Waste Water Treatment Plant. But it also serves as a reminder that other communities, whether it's Flint, Michigan, or Jackson, Mississippi, are still in a vulnerable situation as they try to maintain safe and secure water supplies for their residents.

The problems associated with water – whether too much, too little or too dirty – are now of global concern and must be at the forefront of the considerations of practitioners and policy makers worldwide as we plan and build our communities.

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