

Encouraging conservation of our water

At some point, the capital city needs to install citywide water meters as a means of encouraging conservation

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- (Written by the editor of The Guardian)

All governments should be encouraged to promote water conservation, and so the capital city's launch recently of its Be Water Friendly campaign should be recognized as a worthwhile initiative. But it's only one method of getting people to be more aware of the need to reduce consumption of this precious resource. Installing citywide water meters is another. And at some point, the city needs to bite the bullet and do this.

Charlottetown is currently using about 90 per cent of its available capacity from the Winter River watershed, and is pursuing options for other water sources. In the meantime, however, the city has been encouraging water conservation. It has also moved to water meters for new customers hooking up to the city's water system, but there has been no decision to make that policy citywide.

That has to change. When people have to pay for the water they use, they're likely to become more conscious of that use. As it is now, what incentive is there — apart from the satisfaction of good stewardship — to take shorter showers, turn off the tap while brushing your teeth, or run the dishwasher only when there's a full load?

A public education or promotional program aimed at encouraging people to watch their consumption is laudable, but it must be accompanied by a policy that rewards them for their conservation efforts. Installing water meters is the logical way of doing this because it familiarizes people with the consequences of their good and bad habits. How many people realize, for instance, how many litres of water are saved with a low-flush toilet? Those who don't would find out quickly if a water meter were to measure it and affect their bill at the end of each month.

The city should encourage a public discussion of the pros and cons of water meters. As part of this discussion, it should prepare some examples of average monthly bills for, say, a couple, a family of four, or a single person on a water meter. That would give people a better sense of whether they would end up saving or paying more than they do currently. If they're in the latter category, at least they would be able to take charge and reduce their water bill by reducing consumption.

The timing of this is important. According to city officials, consumption in the city has on occasion reached 96 per cent of the supply. Clearly we need to cut back on our use of this resource. While Charlottetown continues to explore additional water sources, conservation is no longer an option.

Installing water meters may not be wildly popular at first — obviously there would be the initial cost of buying and installing the meters — but if they encourage people to be more conscious of the water they use and motivate them to actually reduce consumption, these devices, in the long run, should end up being a means of saving both water and money. We'll never know until we try it.