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Water supply and regional growth

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Submitted by David Beach | Last edited November 15, 2007 - 10:47am

Posted in: Land regional agenda Water regional agenda

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The City of Cleveland's recent proposal to sell water to Portage County raises lots of issues about where development should be promoted in the region — and who gets to decide.



According to the proposed 20-year agreement, the city's Division of Water (which already serves Cuyahoga County and portions of outlying counties) would supply water to Portage County under a master meter water service agreement for supply to Aurora and other areas within Portage County. The agreement is open-ended about the amount of water to be supplied. The only limitation is that the expanded service area be within the Lake Erie watershed in accordance with Great Lakes Basin agreements restricting water diversions. This area includes about half of Portage County (see map of the watershed boundary below).

In return, Cleveland would receive fees for the water used, as well as payments of \$100,000 per year that will be deposited into a special economic development fund. The agreement also would authorize the city administration "to enter into an economic development agreement or agreements with Portage County and any other necessary public authorities to mitigate economic impacts to Cleveland's General Fund that may result from the extension of water service to the City of Aurora and other areas of Portage County." Thus, the city could be compensated if, for example, a Cleveland company was lured out to Portage County as a result of the new water supply.

It's easy to understand why the parties favor the agreement. The Cleveland Division of Water has lost customers in recent years as the economy of Cuyahoga County has contracted. Now it needs new customers to cover operating costs and debt service (indeed the City Council ordinance to approve the agreement says that the expansion of service area is important for the Division of Water's bond credit rating). In addition, by expanding its customer base, the water system can spread out the burden of future rate increases. (This also explains why the Division of Water doesn't promote water conservation; it wants to pump more water to increase revenues.)

Portage County communities, such as Aurora, would benefit from the agreement because they need a larger and more secure supply of water to serve future growth. They are prevented from drawing water from the major river in the county, the Cuyahoga, because Akron claims all the water from the Cuyahoga. So many Portage County communities have to rely on wells. In Kent's case, for example, wells provide excellent water, but the supply is limited. Cleveland water service, on the other hand, can supply a virtually unlimited volume of water from Lake Erie.

Regional questions about extending water service

But does this deal make sense for the larger region? Here are some questions to ask:

- Why do just two local governments — Cleveland and Portage County — get to decide about something that will have regional impacts on land use and development patterns? What about the interests of other communities in Cuyahoga County that may lose population and tax base to new developments in Portage County? Through the water fees paid by their residents, these other communities have also helped to build the Cleveland water system.

Upcoming Events

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