

Water Worries: Sussex considers usage limits

Ordinance expected by end of May

BY JEFF HARRISON Special to The Freeman

SUSSEX – Many village residents might soon find out the grass isn't always greener on the other side of the fence.

“Would we rather have potable water that we drink or our lawns green?” said Village Administrator Evan Teich. “Because really, that time is coming.”

Sussex is attempting to become one of the first communities in the county to enact an ordinance that would limit the days that residents can water their lawns and wash their cars. Waukesha is also considering similar limitations, with an ordinance expected to go before its common council Thursday.

The Sussex proposal, to be discussed by its water commission and village board this month, is designed to conserve water by curbing usage at peak times in the summer months and averting the need for digging more village wells.

“We have plenty of capacity in our water system during nine months of the year,” said Assistant Village Administrator Jeremy Smith. “We certainly understand the sensitivity of people wanting to have their green lawns, and we don't want to take that away from people, but we want to use our resources wisely.”

The Sussex Water Utility, which was recently created to improve water quality, will soon begin a campaign aimed at informing and educating residents of the water issues.

A potential ordinance should be hashed out by late May, Smith said.

The ordinance will likely split the village into zones to control which days residents could water their lawns and wash their cars, officials said.

The ordinance will only be targeted at “established” lawns. Those with new

lawns would have greater flexibility to water them.

The types of penalties for violating the ordinance are still unclear, village officials said.

The village draws its water supply from a combination of deep and shallow wells, which are becoming less productive because the water table has receded recently.

The water supply also was limited after one of the deep wells became contaminated with radium, Teich said. He said the village has been forced to blend water from that well with water from a shallow well, which does not have radium.

The village's plans for the ordinance have drawn praise from environmental groups that have also been working to promote water conservation.

"It's a good thing that governing bodies are recognizing that there is a need to conserve water," said Laurie Longtine, a board member of the Waukesha County Environmental Action League.

The league and other groups are working to inform the public and promote other methods of conservation. Some ideas they are encouraging are planting plants that require little water and using rain barrels, which are used to collect rainwater that can be used for watering lawns and gardens.

The combination of education and an ordinance are seen as essential to goals of conservation, said Sierra Club conservation organizer Rosemary Wehnes.

"Education of the public probably isn't enough," she said. "We need to have good ordinances in place."

These water problems are not unique to the village.

Many other local suburban communities not able to draw water from Lake Michigan are also struggling to deal with depleted and contaminated wells.

Waukesha has been studying how to handle possible water shortages for years.

“We became complacent because we have such great water resources,” Wehnes said. “We’re kind of coming to the game later than we should be.”

The plan for Sussex is similar to the ordinance being considered in Waukesha, which would be in effect from May 1 to Oct. 1 and likely restrict sprinkling to early mornings and evenings on specified days of the week.

Waukesha is having similar problems as Sussex. The city is trying to reduce its water consumption because the deep wells that provide the majority of the water supply have become less productive and contaminated by radium as well.