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OUR VIEW

Our view: Regional approach to Cayuga County water and sewer issues makes sense

The Citizen Editorial Board Sep 2, 2018



The upper pumping station at Emerson Park in Owasco, which is used by the city of Auburn.

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Kevin Rivoli, The Citizen

After harmful algal bloom toxins in Owasco Lake became an acute threat to the public drinking water sourced from the lake in 2016, New York state came through with critical funding to help get more effective filtration systems in place. A similar scenario played out over the past year regarding the drinking water sourced from Cayuga Lake that supplies Wells College and the Aurora area. In both cases, the state's funds were critical, as the municipalities involved had limited resources. Still, the state needed some considerable prodding from local officials and community advocates before the money was secured.

Now imagine that scenario playing out over and over again, throughout the state, over the next several years.

It's not so far-fetched, as the past two summers have shown the harmful algal bloom problem is a global issue, not something isolated to the lakes in the Cayuga County area.



Cayuga County Water and Sewer Authority hears from experts on regionalization

In its weekly update posted Friday, the state Department of Environmental Conservation reported there are currently 72 major water bodies in the state with suspected or confirmed blooms.

As communities look to the future in preparing their aging water infrastructure systems for this and many other water quality threats, it seems to defy common sense that smaller municipalities such as Auburn, Owasco, Aurora, Skaneateles and a host of others would attempt to tackle these issues on their own.

That's a big reason for a meeting last week organized by the Cayuga County Water and Sewer Authority. The authority, which is a downstream customer of the Auburn systems who then sells water and sewer service to customers in a handful of other communities, has been studying the infrastructure needs of 10 municipalities in the county. It reported that it will take about \$52 million to \$80 million to replace obsolete equipment in those places and develop a much-needed backup source of drinking water for residents whose supplies come from Owasco Lake. Those figures will only get larger with each passing year.

Faced with that reality, we hope the work the authority is doing will spur a new effort to form a truly regional water and sewer system for Cayuga County. This idea was deeply explored several years ago, but fizzled largely over turf-war issues in 2013.

The stakes are simply too high in 2018 not to work through issues of control and power and band together. A larger water and sewer authority will be in a much stronger position to deal with challenges. It will have significantly more resources to pursue state and federal funding, and it should be in a stronger position to get the best interest rates for any borrowing that needs to take place.

Some communities in New York state that have advanced past the turf wars and done effective regionalization had representatives at last week's session and gave some valuable advice. We urge all of the local leaders to heed what they were told and not to let this work by the Cayuga County Water and Sewer Authority go to waste.

The Citizen editorial board includes publisher Rob Forcey, executive editor Jeremy Boyer and managing editor Mike Dowd.