

Report urges incentives for water conservation

Improving infrastructure can save on thousands of wasted litres of water annually, report adds

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Thousands of litres of water a year are wasted across the country on dripping faucets, leaky toilets and lush green lawns, according to a recently released report.

Entitled Thinking Beyond Pipes and Pumps, the report urges municipalities to encourage water conservation through rebate programs and education.

"Not only does it make sense from an environmental point of view but the big story, too, is that it makes sense from an economic point of view," says Tony Maas, a research associate with the Polis Water Sustainability Project, the organization that released the report.

In early October, the City of Lethbridge asked administration to report back, by the end of the year, with a suggested bylaw change that could require all new buildings in Lethbridge to have low flow toilets and bathroom fixtures.

Mayor Bob Tarleck says in the next couple of decades, he sees Lethbridge having more xeriscaping (landscaping which minimizes the need for water) and looking at how large a population the area can sustain.

Calgarians have already started to feel the effects of water shortage, with restrictions on lawn watering and outdoor pools, which started this week.

"We need to think beyond this tradition of 'but we need more,'" Maas says.

The Polis report suggests municipalities improve infrastructure to reduce leaks along the main water lines and start fixture replacement programs, giving rebates and monetary incentives for putting in efficient toilets, faucets and shower heads.

The municipality of Cochrane managed to reduce water consumption by 15 per cent and defer having to build a multi-million dollar water pipeline by offering a rebate program.

The report urges municipalities to hire staff to encourage water conservation and to implement water rationing when needed. It suggests creating a sustainability plan taking into account water usage over decades, rather than just a few years.

"Instead of assuming demand is what it is, we need to start controlling human demand on the infrastructure, which in turn ripples out to the environment," Maas says.

Canadians are among the highest water users among developed countries, using about 335 litres of water daily. The report suggests this is because water rates are among the lowest in the world.

A leaking faucet, with one drop per second, will waste 10,000 litres of water in a year and a typical suburban lawn uses 100,000 litres of water — over and above rainwater — in a summer.

Better use and collection of rainwater, creating landscapes that have plants that require less watering, and reusing water from sinks in flushing toilets are other ways the Polis report points to as ways to conserve the valuable resource.

"It is a different approach but not so dramatically different that it's not doable," Maas says.