THE ABSURDITY OF CONNECTICUT'S WATER POLITICS

The absurdity of Connecticut's water politics stuns me. Yes, we need a comprehensive statewide plan, which explains why state law (Public Act 14-163) requires submission of one to the General Assembly by Jan. 1, 2018. But funding for its creation seems to have gone missing. This may explain why an insider committee known as the Water Planning Council turned to the University of Connecticut to provide the "senior administrative leadership" needed.

Scientifically, this makes good sense because UConn is the state's land-grant university with broad expertise in water science and water policy, and retains ecologist Gene Likens as an in-house environmental sage. Politically, this makes sense because UConn is the darling of state lawmakers and the governor's office. But with respect to stakeholder fairness, it makes no sense because UConn is only one of many players competing for a statewide resource.

This week's policy thunderstorm is a draft memorandum of understanding between the council and UConn that puts the university's chief political strategist, Thomas Callahan, in the driver's seat. Keep in mind that one of his recent assignments led to the importation of water to Storrs via pipeline to accommodate unsustainable growth.

To facilitate public discussion, the council held a special meeting on Aug. 19 titled: "State Water Plan -- How Do We Get There?" and is soliciting comment until Sept. 5 (bruce.wittchen@ct.gov).

For starters, let's acknowledge the dual nature of water. It's our state's most precious resource and its most potent geologic hazard. Both droughts and floods jeopardize our water supply. Yet the state law concerns itself with only the resource side of this duality. How is this comprehensive?

Allocating water is a game of chance because the arrivals and deficits are based on historic probabilities that won't fit our new climate. And the gamble is a zero-sum game, meaning that for every winner, there will also be a loser. Section b3 of Public Act 14-163 identifies the players: "public water supply, economic development, recreation and ecological health." As with poker, each player has a vested interest in taking the pot. Curiously, the act mandates a plan that balances these vested interests "for their greatest benefits," a phrase that was stripped from the memorandum. Why?

Transparency is key. Public water supply is, in fact, quasi-public, if not wholly private. Water corporations make money by selling water, not by conserving it. Economic development is profit driven, with corporations seeking to minimize the costs for getting good water and disposing bad water. Recreational uses compete with each other: were the kayakers in charge, our cities would have no water. Ecological health includes us as living creatures seeking to live in balance with Nature, rather than suck it dry.

The natural three-dimensional geography of water must be honored. Groundwater and topographic divides, rather than municipalities and congressional districts, are the ideal management boundaries. Robbing Peter to pay Paul, groundwater to pay stream flow, or one river to pay another violates the natural order of things.

My quixotic advice is to change the game. Map out an actual world of inputs, outputs, mechanisms and storages that ignores political abstractions and grandfathered promises. Tweak that map for the climate changes in progress. Superimpose on that tweaked map the circuitous, mind-numbing, and money-corrupted world of water politics (streamingwater.org/useful-links/). Examine the misalignments. Make the adjustments.
Happily, the memorandum between the council and UConn makes it clear that "Mr. Callahan's activities ... will be undertaken solely at the direction of the WPC, acting through its chair." If true, this will be a win-win situation because the state will be getting a senior administrative consultant at no cost, and the university will be contributing to a shared future while amending past wrongs. If not true, a UConn insider with a vested interest will hammer out the state’s comprehensive water plan.

My suggestion is to re-boot the process with adequate funding, rather than continue to cut corners by making political sausage. Let the state water plan be developed by a committee led by scientific and policy experts, rather than by lobbyists or other special interests.