

A giant step for regionalism

The water agreement that sets the stage to build a pipeline across the Thames River and supply water from Groton to Montville is by itself a monumental step for regionalism in southeastern Connecticut, but some of the additional details of the arrangement carry even more promise.

A crucial detail is the enhanced role of the Southeastern Connecticut Water Authority, for year a small-time operation that specialized in bailing out failed private water systems in developments around the region. The authority now will operate the water line in Montville that will carry the water to the town and to the Mohegan Sun casino, the major customer and party which helped make the arrangement possible. SCWA also will administer funds to maintain the new system, which will link water systems on both sides of the river.

These two responsibilities may sound small, but two years ago, the authority enjoyed so little respect that it would have been unthinkable to have entrusted it with even these duties. The greater significance, however, is that the relationship sets the stage for a much larger role for the authority, and for a truly regional system that can develop new supplies and plan years ahead to meet the region's water needs.

The agreement signed last week enables the participating communities, the city of Groton, Ledyard and Montville, to apply for a water diversion permit to pump water from the Groton reservoirs to Montville. The costs of the \$12 million project that will connect the Groton and Montville systems through Ledyard will be shared. The Mohegan Tribe will finance a major portion of the cost. Its offer of financial help was the catalyst that got the project off the ground.

This project will have a huge impact because it potentially will link nine communities in the region and three major municipal water companies. The initial agreement provides a new water supply for Montville, and potential source of additional water for Waterford. Waterford purchases its water today from New London, which faces a shortage. The availability of Groton water takes some of the pressure

Historic water agreement foreshadows a larger role for the Southeastern Connecticut Water Authority and a future in which the region can plan ahead together to meet its water needs.

off New London.

Eventually East Lyme, which is experiencing a water shortage with its own well system, could connect to the system, as could Preston when the Norwich Hospital property is developed. The arrangement works in the opposite direction, as well. Preston, for example, could develop its own supply and ship it to Groton to be treated and sold elsewhere in the system. The system that is evolving could have the potential to operate like an electrical grid.

The water authority will be important because it has the legal authority to do what none of the communities or water systems can do on their own, to develop water supplies and distribution systems with low-interest bonds. It could become the administrative framework for a regional water system that not only moves water from one place to another but invests in the development of new supplies and plans for the future.

In the past, while SCWA had the legal authority to develop a regional system, it didn't enjoy the confidence of the communities or the three water systems, in Norwich, New London and Groton. But times are changing, as last week's historic agreement signaled. The authority has new blood on its board of directors, including Mayor Dennis Popp, chairman of Groton Utilities. Municipal chief executives like Mayor Popp have played an important role in bringing about regional cooperation on the water issue through their presence on the Southeastern Connecticut Council of Governments.

Water has brought them closer together, and this unity of purpose can help them solve other problems cooperatively.