Managing groundwater must be part of planning housing | Opinion

Rep. Megan L. Cotter Guest columnist

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Rhode Island faces a housing crisis that requires new development, but this must be balanced with ensuring a sustainable water supply.

A new legislative commission will study the impact of housing development on groundwater, particularly in rural areas relying on private wells.

The commission aims to provide local officials and developers with better data and clearer standards for water capacity.

The goal is to integrate water supply planning with housing growth, not to hinder development.

There is no question that developing more homes is imperative to address Rhode Island's housing crisis.

There is also no understating the importance of ensuring that every home, new or existing, has access to a consistent supply of the clean, healthy water its inhabitants need.

Water capacity is readily available for areas served by public water systems. But in rural communities that rely on private wells, like those in my district, how do we know the impact new development will have on groundwater? And how do we plan and manage this critical resource as we develop the housing we desperately need?

These are the questions I seek to answer with the new study commission I am chairing in the House. I sponsored the legislation to create the water supply planning commission because water capacity must be part of any serious conversation about housing growth.

Housing development and water supply planning shouldn't be framed as opposing goals. Rhode Island needs more housing, and all Rhode Islanders need safe drinking water. The underlying goal of our bipartisan commission – which

includes experts and stakeholders from housing development, state and municipal decisionmakers and managers of water resources – is to connect these objectives and set our state on the path toward succeeding at both.

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Water doesn't recognize property lines, and safe drinking-water supplies are neither infinite nor equally available throughout the state. Accordingly, rather than simply making development decisions parcel by parcel, we should be considering the wider results of withdrawing more groundwater. One project might appear sustainable on its own, but what happens when several developments draw from the same groundwater resource? Do nearby homeowners deserve information about whether development may have any impact on their wells' long-term viability? And how can we scale this sort of planning on a regional or statewide level?

Our commission will explore whether we have the full range of data to determine the effects of development on groundwater capacity, as well as what we know about recharge rates, seasonal variation, drought conditions, groundwater availability, water quality and climate effects. Where are the gaps? And who is responsible for filling them?

Local officials need tools, not merely responsibility. One of the ultimate goals of this commission is to ensure all local planners and decision-makers have access to the data they need about groundwater and are trained in using it effectively.

I want to be clear that stifling development is not going to be part of our agenda. Developers benefit from having information about whether the water exists to support their plans, and they've told us time and time again about their need for clear expectations in the development process. With their help, this commission can create a straightforward process that can better encourage development of good homes.

None of our members want to waste our time creating another report that sits on a shelf. I am committed to enacting any statutory changes this study identifies as necessary. What we want is better data about groundwater statewide, earlier water-capacity review, clearer standards for developers, better coordination among agencies and tools municipalities can actually use.

Ultimately, our goal is to know that every Rhode Islander, whether they live in a new home or an old one, has plenty of safe, clean water when they turn on the tap.

Rep. Megan L. Cotter, D-District 39, Exeter, Richmond, Hopkinton, is chairwoman of the House Water Supply Planning Commission.