

Diverse group weighs in on water proposals

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A town hall-style meeting on the proposed statewide water management plan drew more than 100 locals to The Forum Monday — and most called for protections against a metro Atlanta drain on Northwest Georgia resources.

"We are concerned that what we do today does not jeopardize our potential 50 to 100 years out," said Sam Freeman of the Greater Rome Chamber of Commerce.

Freeman was one of several speakers who said water transferred from the Coosa to the Chattahoochee river basin should be returned in the form of treated wastewater.

Pumping it back is more costly than the current system of letting it run into the receiving basin, said Eric Lindberg, environmental services director for Rome and Floyd County, but "let those who benefit from the transfer of water pay the true cost of choosing to be in a place that doesn't have enough."

The Georgia Environmental Protection Division must present a plan by July 1 to the Water Council — a group of eight state agency heads,

two citizens and four state legislators. Recommendations from the council are due to the Georgia General Assembly in January 2008.

"We want to make sure, as we move forward, that the plan is representative of wide public interests," said Department of Natural Resources Commissioner Noel Holcomb, who attended the town hall meeting as a Water Council member.

The plan was mandated by a 2004 legislative act that acknowledges Georgia's water is not evenly distributed and requires it to be managed for the good of the entire state.

City Manager John Bennett, who serves on a basin advisory committee created to provide local input on the plan, said the metro area will need more water in the future — and it should start building reservoirs to meet those needs now.

"Lake Allatoona can't support the longterm needs of metro Atlanta, and we shouldn't have to build a reservoir in the future to make up for what's lost now," Bennett said.

Several speakers also opposed pollutant allocation trading — a proposal that would let big water pollut-

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ers "trade" for the unused part of the pollutant allowance assigned to other permit holders.

"A market-based approach like that could affect the health of people downstream of a place that buys credits instead of adding controls," said Dr. Thomas Farmer of Rome.

Farmer also said a good management plan will include conservation measures that will keep Atlanta from sapping the water and "ecological and economic future of Northwest Georgia."

Leigh Askew of the University of Georgia's Fanning Institute gathered public comments at the session to include in the Water Council's analysis of the report due from EPD. Additional comments can be submitted via e-mail at watercomments@fanning.uga.edu through Feb. 2, she said.