

EDITORIAL: Wiser water use lets arid Colorado thrive

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Gazette editorial board

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Colorado's No. 3 city aims to blaze a trail toward smarter management of our scarcest resource — water. An aggressive proposal to do just that — getting ahead of the curve on water use to accommodate coming growth and development — will face Aurora's City Council on Monday.

First-term Mayor Mike Coffman shared the sweeping and far-reaching water-conservation plan with The Gazette's editorial board this week, making clear what's at stake: "I want Aurora to be able to grow."

"I think we're really poised for growth," Coffman said, but noted, "unless we do something now for water conservation, we are not going to be able to grow."

Hence, a proposal that doesn't pull punches. If approved by the council, it would bar conventional, thirsty lawn grasses for many if not most uses in new developments. So, no Kentucky bluegrass in the front yards of new homes or around other kinds of structures if it's for purely aesthetic purposes. Turf grasses would be permitted only where warranted for sports or recreation or related activities; it even would be restricted to less than half of the back yards of new residences.

The ordinance also prohibits the use of those same "cool weather" turf grasses for development of new golf courses. And ornamental water features — decorative fountains, waterfalls, basins and ponds — would not be allowed.

Parks would be permitted to use turf grasses for new sports fields, play areas and social areas.

The restrictions only would apply to landscaping around new construction and not to the city's existing housing or commercial buildings. Yet, the water conservation in the newly developed areas would be substantial. Aurora Water General Manager Marshall Brown says water consumption for outdoor uses would be cut in half for new developments.

Brown calls the plan "the most aggressive in the state," and Coffman says, "Aurora is leading the way." The mayor in fact predicts, "The rest of Colorado is going to have to look at what Aurora is doing," if it wants to continue growing. Indeed, other cities already have reached out to Aurora regarding hits plan, which if adopted next week would take effect Jan. 1.

Many Colorado homeowners take pride in their landscaping, of course, and especially in their lush lawns — as do homeowners in much of the rest of the country. Yet, our high-and-dry climate is very different from Missouri's or Ohio's or Florida's, and it requires a different tack as the Front Range continues to boom.

If Colorado communities don't take bold steps soon, whether like Aurora's or comparable efforts, the upshot could be policies that are not only restrictive — but also reckless. Most notably, misguided policy makers could attempt to use Colorado's perennial and growing water scarcity as a pretext for limiting or stopping growth itself.

That's something Coffman wisely, and adamantly, opposes. It's something nobody should want. For the good of Colorado's economy and its future prosperity — its ability to create great jobs for our kids and their kids — we cannot afford to let water's scarcity stand in the way of progress. Instead, we should get smart about water use.

Aurora's pending proposal would be a stride in that direction, and the City Council would be wise to adopt it.