



City of Barre, Vermont

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Vermont Senate Committee on Natural Resources and Energy - Testimony on S.224

Chair Watson, Vice Chair Williams, and members of the Senate Committee on Natural Resources and Energy:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of S.224.

The Thurman Dix Reservoir located in Orange, Vermont provides drinking water to thousands of Barre residents. Its sole purpose is to supply clean, safe water. Activities that threaten contamination are a public health risk and place added strain on a treatment system that was never designed for those hazards. Our treatment plant costs \$2.8 million annually to operate. It was built as a standard facility and is not designed to remove contaminants introduced by recreation, such as gasoline, benzene, or other hazardous substances.

Under current law, even though the City of Barre owns the reservoir and all land surrounding it, we do not have the authority to restrict high-risk activities that affect our resident's drinking water. S.224 would allow municipalities to make local decisions based on the specific conditions and responsibilities associated with their drinking water source.

Reservoirs that supply drinking water are fundamentally different from other surface waters. Their sole purpose is to provide clean, reliable water. Protecting water quality at the source is one of the most effective and affordable ways to safeguard public health. Recreational use, particularly activities involving direct contact, introduces contaminants such as pathogens, nutrients, and fuel, which strain treatment systems and increase costs. Even well-functioning treatment systems face added risk and financial burden when source contamination increases.

National guidance, including from the American Water Works Association, recommends limiting recreation on reservoirs that serve public water systems. We are asking for the ability to apply that science locally, where we are directly responsible for protecting our water system and the residents who depend on it.

The critical need for this legislation was highlighted by a recent incident in which the Department of Environmental Conservation approved a fishing tournament on the Dix Reservoir. The applicant was a New Hampshire resident with a history of attempting to access protected reservoirs in Central Vermont for personal use. The City was not notified until after the permit had been issued, and unfortunately we had no other choice but to trespass this individual from the site. The Department acknowledges that there is no public access to the reservoir, (short of parachuting in, access requires trespassing) yet it still approved the event.

This decision sets up an entirely avoidable conflict between individuals attempting to access the site, our police department, and our water treatment staff. We are stewards of this water system, yet we currently have no legal authority to prevent outside recreational use approved by the state. Permits can be issued even when access requires crossing City-owned land.

This is why S.224 is necessary. Some states, like Massachusetts, have adopted statewide restrictions on recreational use of reservoirs that supply drinking water. We are not asking the state to go that far. We simply believe our City Council should have the ability to protect our community's drinking water system. Vermont has more than 800 lakes and ponds open for outdoor recreation. Drinking water reservoirs are different. The Dix holds 588 million gallons and serves a single community. Berlin Pond holds 1.5 billion. Lake Champlain holds more than 6 trillion. Smaller reservoirs like ours are more vulnerable to contamination and less able to absorb pollutants without consequence.

S.224 gives municipalities the ability to determine how their own drinking water reservoirs are managed. If one community decides to allow access, it can. If another community, like Barre, determines that the risks are too great, it should have the ability to act. Local governments that fund, operate, and maintain these systems should also be empowered to protect them.

For these reasons, I strongly support this legislation and I hope you will too.

I welcome your questions.

Respectfully,
Nicholas Storellicastro
City Manager, Barre City