



# The Metropolitan North Georgia Water Planning District Celebrates Twenty Years



Photo by Audrey Andersen

## Leadership and Necessity: Looking to Our Past to Define Our Future

By Katherine Zitsch

Water is the lifeblood of any modern city. So Atlanta's transformation from a Southern railroad town with limited access to water supply into a thriving metropolis is not a typical story.

Our unlikely cast of characters includes the Chattahoochee River, which traverses the metro area – providing drinking water to about two-thirds of our residents – yet is one of the smallest watersheds in the country for a river serving this many people. The granite that we see at Stone Mountain extends under a large part of our region, preventing reliable access to groundwater. And our rainfall – which can be both plentiful and variable – is the sometimes hero that doesn't always show up at the right time or with the right amount.

Yet, Atlanta exists today as a leading American city. Home to 5.5 million residents and 30 Fortune 1,000 companies, it is a place where nature flourishes, people thrive and businesses prosper.

The unique nature of our water story is the very reason water management is so critical in our region. I am often asked how metro Atlanta has been so effective at what we do. How have we reduced our per capita water usage by 30 percent over the past two decades? The answer can be stated simply, but is endlessly complex: leadership and necessity.

In the 1990s, our region faced a crossroads where both the quality and quantity of water was poised to threaten our vitality. Our watersheds were polluted, our

supply was stressed, and there was a very real risk that the sewer taps in the region would be cut off.

Leadership from our government, business and environmental communities saw the writing on the wall, and water quickly became a unifying force for unparalleled coordination, collaboration and cooperation.

The birth of the Metropolitan North Georgia Water Planning District (Metro Water District) created the organizational structure to involve hundreds of people in developing plans that would shape our water future – identifying how much water was needed, where it would come from, and what we needed to do to use it efficiently and responsibly. Diverse stakeholders with different backgrounds, political affiliations, interests

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*The future of metro Atlanta depends on water. And, our access to clean, safe water depends on you.*

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and expertise came together to address these very complex issues: water supply, stormwater management and water quality.

All were invited to the table. The debate was robust, but conducted in a calm and civil way—pushing us forward to develop innovative strategies to protect our rivers, drive down our water use and

ensure the region will have the water it needs long into the future. Equally important to our success was a focused education effort to make sure that the public understood why these measures were important.

Perhaps our most significant moment of truth was the severe drought of 2006 through 2009. We watched Lake Lanier drop to alarmingly low levels. But day after day, we turned on our taps and the water was flowing.

It is difficult to imagine a different outcome, but this period confirmed the Metro Water District's conservation, efficiency and education measures were critical to metro Atlanta's future. It was a testament to what we had accomplished and a call to action that more was needed. With a renewed sense of urgency, we improved the ways we manage water supply in a sustainable way—both by increasing our efficiency and reducing what we need, and by returning more of the water we use back to the system.

Despite these past accomplishments, our story is just beginning. The next 20 years might even be harder than the last. We're seeing increased and lengthier cycles of drought and heavy rain. Intense, localized rainfall events are causing flooding across our region. And, we're continuing to grow. Because – let's face it – metropolitan Atlanta is a wonderful place to live and work.

But building the infrastructure to address these needs equitably requires long term planning - and the longer we wait, the more difficult it will be.

We look to our past for inspiration, knowing that it will take all of us—business leaders, elected officials, water professionals and citizens—working together.

The future of metro Atlanta depends on water. And our access to clean, safe water depends on you.

*Katherine Zitsch is the Director of the Metro Water District.*

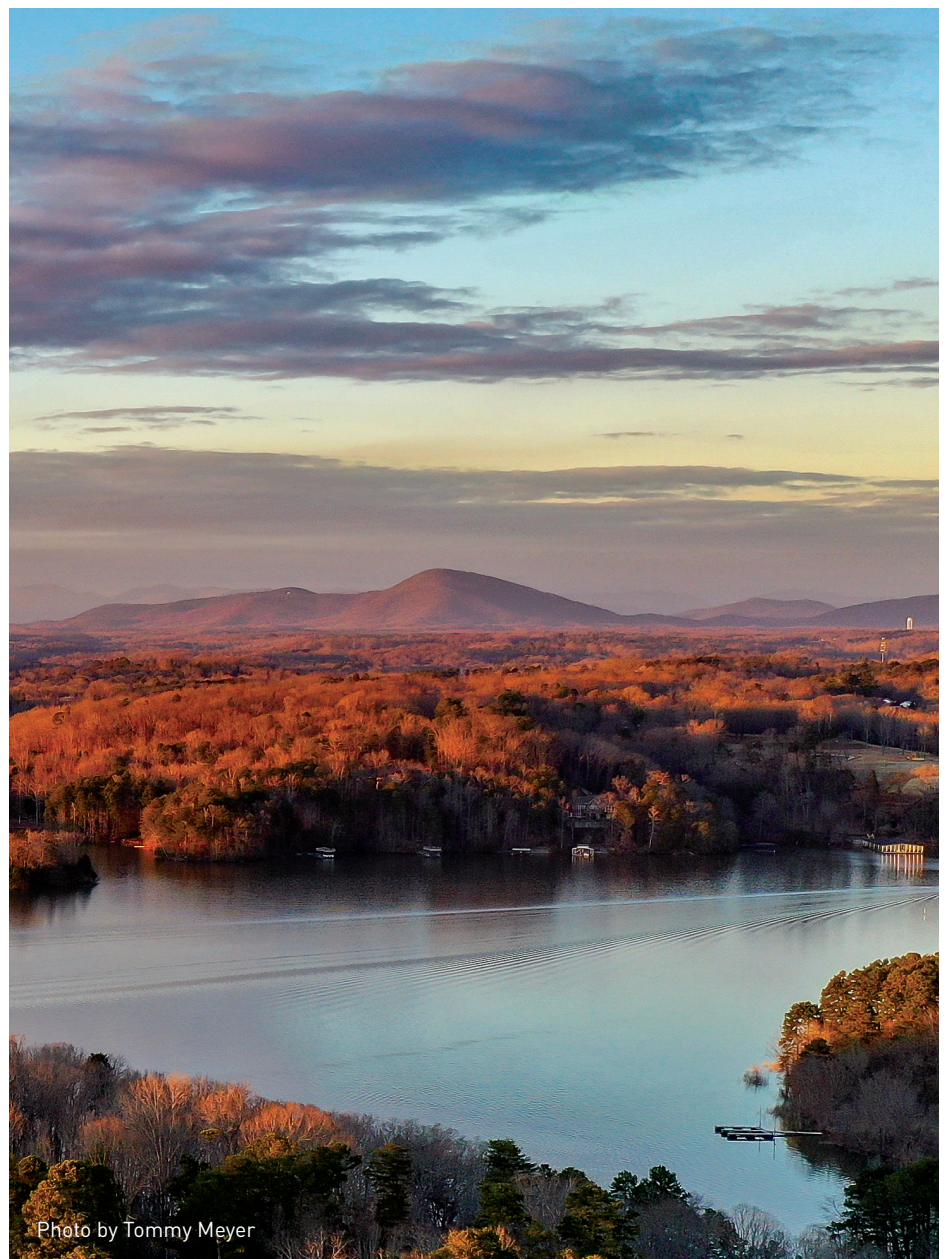


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# Water: Essential for Business, Essential for Life



By Katie Kirkpatrick

Water. We use it so much we take its abundance and reliability for granted. But when scarcity strikes, the issue quickly comes to a boil.

Throughout human history, we've built our civilizations around water. We fish in it. We transport products on it. We pump it out to grow food. But mainly, we need it to drink. It's essential for human life – so, through the millennia, many have died warring over it.

Metro Atlanta faces a unique situation. It's an exception to the rule that major cities grow up alongside large bodies of water. Augusta, Macon and Columbus are located where the local river meets the fall line – boats could go no further. Atlanta's place on the map wasn't determined by nature but by railroads; the tracks converged here, at Terminus, in the 1800s.

By the 1980s, Atlanta had reached a different kind of crucial point. Before Atlanta emerged as the Deep South's first major city, the less-than-mighty Chattahoochee could easily fulfill the region's water needs.

As metro Atlanta boomed in the last 40 years, complications developed. A series of major droughts hit the basin, and our downstream neighboring states got increasingly nervous that metro Atlanta would take more than its fair share of this precious, shared resource. Instead of armies on battlefields, Georgia, Alabama and Florida

fought the Tri-State Water Wars in the courts. Meanwhile, metro Atlanta struggled to secure water rights to the supplies from Lake Lanier, Lake Allatoona and the Chattahoochee River that we would need to continue to grow and thrive.

Metro Atlanta faced an existential crisis. The region could no longer sustain its rate of growth. Like so many times before, Atlanta's business and civic community stepped up to provide the vision and advocacy needed for positive change.

Back then, my predecessors at the Metro Atlanta Chamber – led by our longtime president Sam Williams – and others convened stakeholders to find a solution. As a leading economic development organization, the Metro Atlanta Chamber knew a water shortage would diminish the region's quality of life and harm our ability to nurture new businesses, land major job expansions and recruit headquarters of Fortune 500 companies.

From this extraordinary effort, the Georgia General Assembly created the Metropolitan North Georgia Water Planning District in 2001. The Metro Water District, which currently includes 15 counties and 95 municipalities, then began work on one of the most comprehensive water management plans in the entire nation under the guidance of a 26-member board that includes 16 elected officials and 10 citizen members. I'm proud to serve as one of those citizen members on behalf of Georgia Speaker of the House David Ralston.

What makes the Metro Water District unique are the binding provisions between planning and permitting by the Georgia Environmental Protection Division. Notably, the Metro Water District's programs are required and enforced.

Since its inception, Atlanta's need to smartly manage and conserve its water resources led to groundbreaking policies that have paid off and set the standard for other regions around the United States.

A rebate program that incentivizes owners of older homes to switch to new, high efficiency toilets has resulted in over 150,000 new toilets replaced in our region since 2008, saving 2.4 million gallons of water every day. Every jurisdiction in the Metro Water District has adopted "conservation pricing," meaning that consumers pay an increasingly higher rate when they use more water. On the business side, local ordinances require car washes to recycle their water, which reduces their consumption by 50 percent.

These are just a few examples, but the results speak volumes or, perhaps in this case, gallons. Since plan implementation, the Metro Water District has reduced per capita water demand by over 30 percent. Importantly, these reforms have greatly improved our standing in the Tri-State Water Wars. In a lawsuit filed by the state of Florida, the Supreme Court recently ruled in Georgia's favor in part because the facts clearly demonstrate the region's responsible stewardship of its water.

These strides have played a role in Georgia's continued ranking as the number one state for business. In tight competition

with other states, an unstable or unsustainable water supply would become part of the make-or-break decisions of site selectors and corporate decision makers.

The Metro Water District's 20th anniversary is a great time to look back on our achievements and celebrate the can-do spirit that our region and state have always brought to serious problems. But it's also a moment for today's business and community leaders to understand that the work isn't over, and we must commit ourselves to carrying the vision implemented 20 years ago forward.

We know that new challenges are on the horizon. Climate change could affect our water supply in ways we can't fully predict. Though we're not suffering from drought at the moment, we have before and we will again.

With the Metro Water District, we have the infrastructure we need to plan for a sustainable water future. It's our duty now to make sure the region's leaders have even more accomplishments to celebrate 20 years from now.

*Katie Kirkpatrick is President and CEO of the Metro Atlanta Chamber*

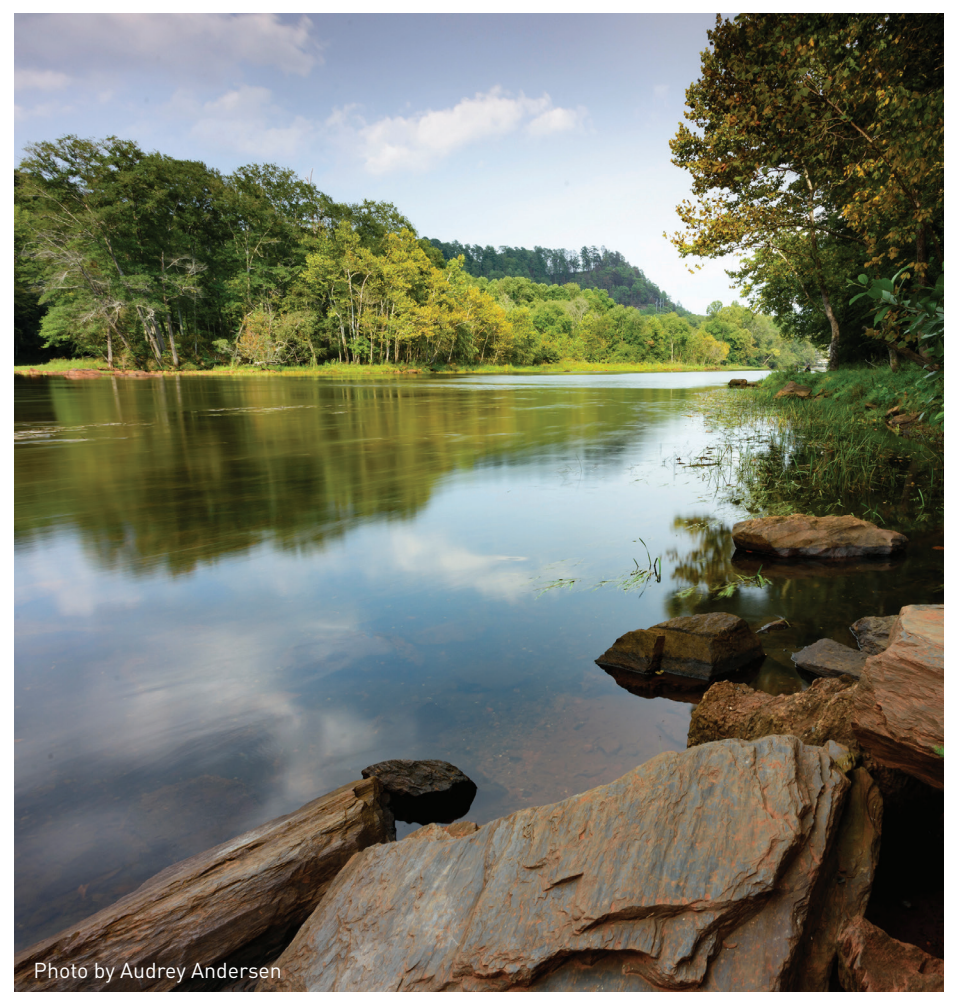
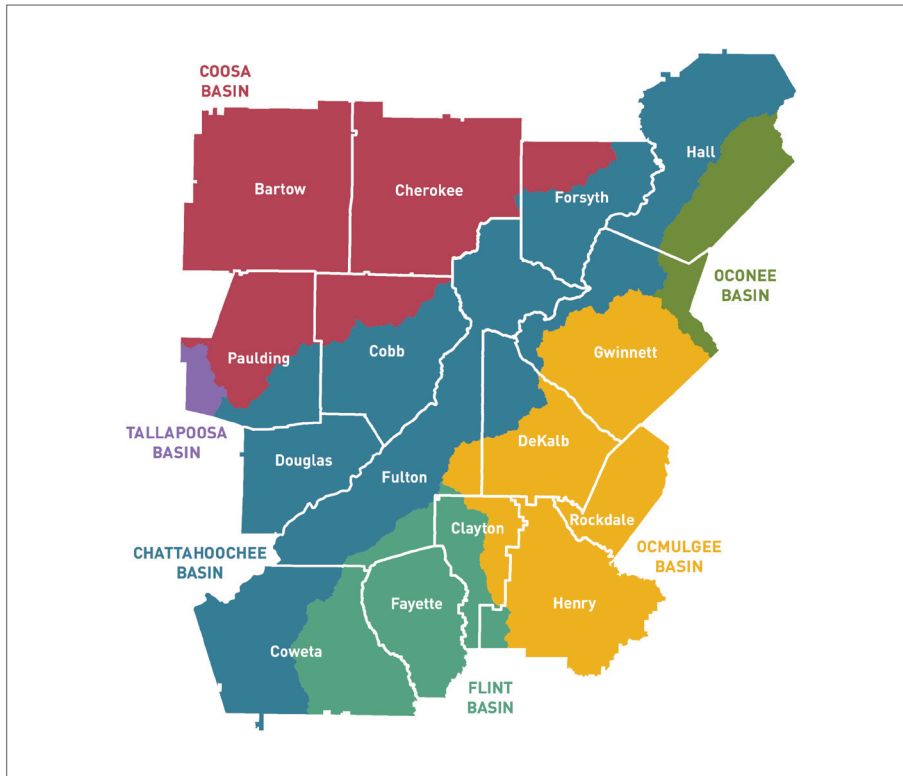


Photo by Audrey Andersen

# 20 Years of Impact

A Q&A between Danny Johnson, Manager of the Metro Water District, and Glenn Page, Board Chair of the Metro Water District, about Chairman Page's perspective on the Metro Water District's impact.



The six river basins and 15 counties covered by the Metro Water District.

## Q. Twenty years ago, the state legislature founded the Metro Water District. What was its mission when it was founded?

A. Our primary charge in 2001 was to facilitate region-wide planning for stormwater, water supply and wastewater treatment. Metropolitan Atlanta includes over 100 cities and counties overlapping six river systems. Water obviously doesn't follow political boundaries, and the authorizing legislation recognized the need to work together to protect our limited water resources. Twenty years ago, parts of the region had serious water quality issues. We were immediately tasked with developing a plan to meet water quality standards in order to accommodate new development and with identifying the immediate and future infrastructure needs for our growing region.

## Q. I started as an engineer here in metro Atlanta just one year after the Metro Water District was formed. Over the course of my career, I've noticed water planning has changed dramatically. We now take a "one water" approach to managing our water systems. Can you elaborate on that change and why it occurred?

A. I've noticed that same change, though my career has been a little longer. I was involved at the technical level with development of the first plan, and each one since. The first sets of plans in 2003 and 2009 each consisted of three individual plans: one each for stormwater, water supply and conservation, and wastewater. We started with three different plans because these processes are typically managed by different segments of our water utilities and governments, many of which tended—more than now—to be siloed.

We now better recognize that those systems are all interconnected. It is intuitive today, but we didn't necessarily design solutions two decades ago with the bigger "water system" in mind. For example, decisions regarding where we discharge our highly treated wastewater impact our water supply availability. Additionally, stormwater run-off impacts the quality of our water supply. Breaking down these silos was important. Today, we operate under a consolidated plan that takes a "one water" approach, combining each of the systems into a single plan and evaluating how decisions in each system impact the others.

## Q. We consider it a significant achievement that per capita water usage across the region has dropped by over 30 percent since 2000. How have we been able to impact water usage so significantly?

A. We attribute this success, in part, to three of our key requirements: utility-level leak detection, tiered water pricing and toilet rebates. Across the Metro Water District, utilities are implementing strategic leak detection methods and technology, such as sonar, that help them find and fix leaks. This directly decreases the amount of water lost from our systems.

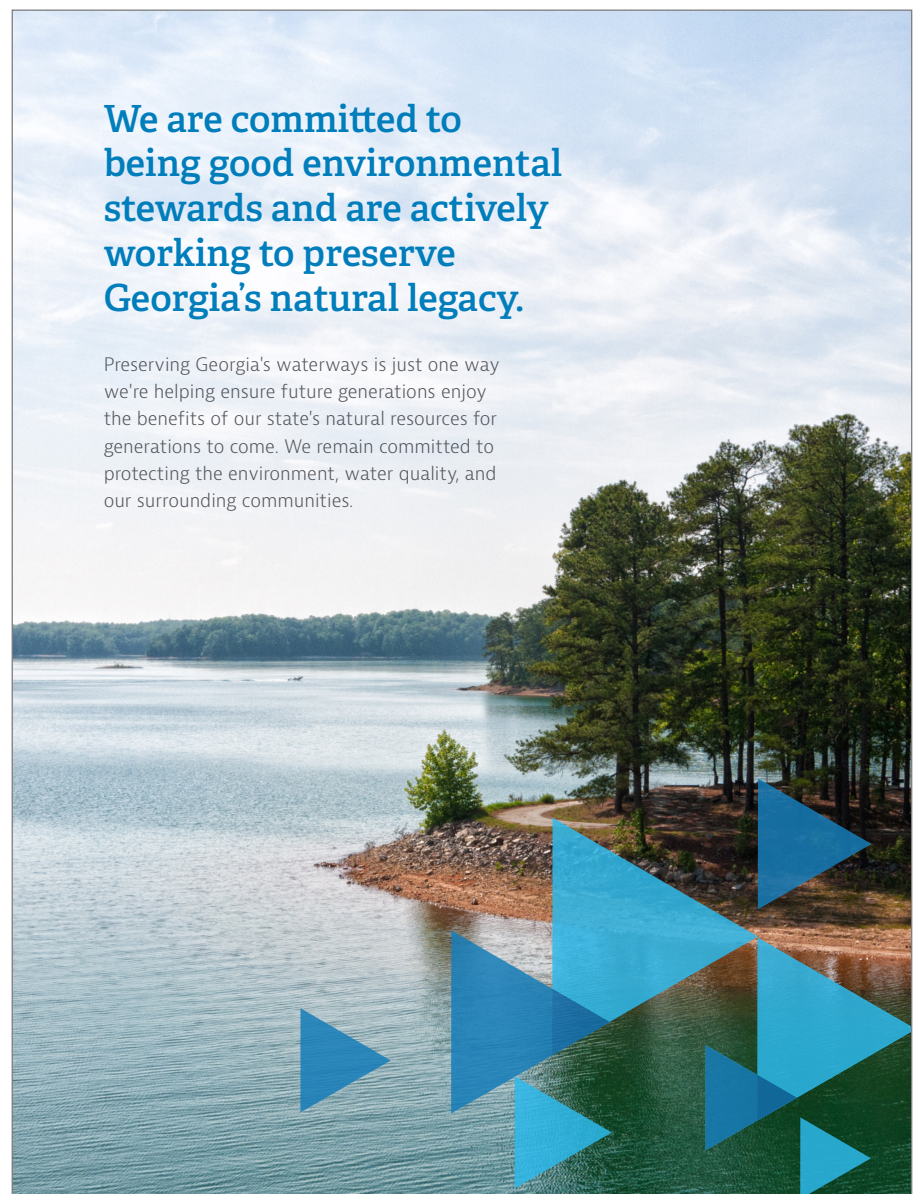
Tiered pricing is also now a requirement for all water utilities in the region. This strategy was uncommon before the Metro Water District's

formation. Essentially it means that the price a resident pays for water increases with the amount used, making it more expensive when a resident uses more water. This sends a direct signal about the value of water and its limited availability, and encourages conservation. It's hard to believe that, before we were formed, water was priced to encourage more use, not less.

Finally, the toilet rebate program, a required plan element launched in 2008, has resulted in more than 150,000 older, inefficient toilets being replaced with high efficiency models. Under this program, an older, water-wasting toilet in a home built in 1993 or earlier can be replaced with an ultra-high-efficiency model, and the owner can get a rebate on their water bill.

## We are committed to being good environmental stewards and are actively working to preserve Georgia's natural legacy.

Preserving Georgia's waterways is just one way we're helping ensure future generations enjoy the benefits of our state's natural resources for generations to come. We remain committed to protecting the environment, water quality, and our surrounding communities.



Utilities — and consumers — in the counties covered by the Metro Water District are saving more than 2.4 million gallons of water per day through these replacements.

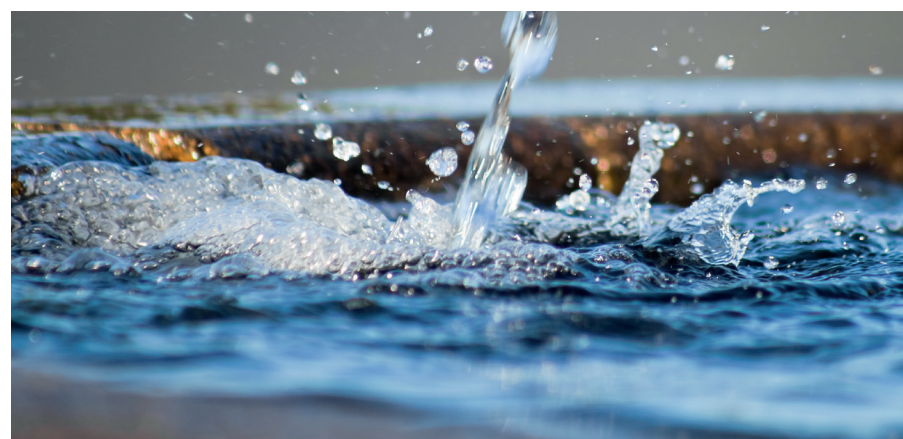
**Q. The Metro Water District has achieved a lot in its 20 years. What do you think are the keys to its success?**

**A.** I'd say there have been three keys to our success: plan flexibility, consistency across the region and cooperation. First, flexibility: our plans must work for a broad range of cities and counties across the region, from smaller, more rural towns to counties with one million residents. The requirements allow local governments flexibility in how they manage requirements, but they also create a level playing field that supports a regional approach.

The level playing field is driven by the fact that all of the requirements must be implemented across the region. For a water, wastewater or stormwater permit to be issued by the Georgia Environmental Protection

Division, a city, county or utility must be in compliance with our requirements. For example, to achieve the water demand reductions our region has seen, utilities in the counties covered by the Metro Water District have implemented programs that effectively cause them to sell less water. We are successful because we've eliminated the economic competitiveness in making these water savings efforts a requirement.

Finally, we are an excellent example of regional planning and cooperation. We were set up for success because of the stakeholders we bring into our decision making — from elected officials to utility directors and engineers to interested citizens. By providing a space to discuss the importance of water, a framework for making regional decisions and an understanding of how local decisions impact our broader regional resources, we have proven that governments can work together to achieve meaningful success.



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# Engaging Our Communities, Because Water Stewardship Is Everyone's Role

By Sarah Skinner

## Water Education Creates Water-Aware Citizens

Since its inception in 2001, public education has been an important part of the Metro Water District's planning efforts. Our engaging events, contests, and local and statewide partnerships have helped build a first-class regional education program that is nationally recognized.

Why do we invest resources in water education? Because well-informed citizens are a critical component in protecting and conserving our valuable water resources. We focus on public education so that individuals can build an appreciation for this precious resource and an understanding of everything that is required – the people, planning, infrastructure and investment – to keep clean water flowing into our homes and businesses, to treat wastewater effectively, and to prevent stormwater pollution

from entering our streams and waterways. Water education is about helping people create a strong connection to their water resources and a desire to want to protect those resources.

## Programs for Every Age

We offer annual events and contests for metro area residents of all ages. Our two signature contests for kids – the Middle School Essay Contest and the High School Video Contest – ask teens to think deeply about a range of water topics, including water conservation, drought, water quality, watershed management and jobs in the water industry. The quality of the work that is contributed and the amount of critical thought put into their entries are incredible and heart-warming.

We host two hallmark events each year that draw thousands of participants. The Water Drop Dash 5K takes place every March in celebration of the

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) WaterSense Fix a Leak Week. Participants engage with water providers and learn about water conservation tips, water efficient products, and how to fix leaks in their homes and businesses. We look forward to holding our 10th Annual 5K on March 19! And in celebration of National Drinking Water Week in May of each year, we host the Children's Water Festival, a field-day style event during which elementary aged children learn about watershed protection; drinking water sources; what to do with fats, oils and grease on their dinner plates (scrape them into the trash, not the sink!); and more.

And what water education program would be complete without a calendar contest? The Water Reflections Calendar Photo Contest asks participants to submit photographs of their favorite water feature in the region and reflect on what that

river, lake, stream, etc. means to them. We have even read a meaningful reflection on the importance of morning dew on a blade of grass! This contest is a favorite among both participants and staff alike, as it allows us to view some of the most beautiful sights our region has to offer and "visit" many hidden gems we may never get to experience in person.

We also manage two awareness campaigns: the Clean Water Campaign (CWC) and My Drop Counts (MDC). Created as a multi-agency, cross-jurisdictional educational effort, CWC focuses on watershed protection and stormwater pollution prevention. Under the CWC brand, we provide helpful tips and fun resources for residents of all ages about how to protect our ecosystems and drinking water sources.

Created in 2011, MDC began as a water conservation pledge program aimed at reducing indoor and outdoor water use at home



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*MMM is proud to support the efforts of the Metropolitan North Georgia Water Planning District and help celebrate its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary.*



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- offering tips and resources to encourage good water use habits. In 2018, MDC expanded to include an opportunity for businesses to commit to making an investment to reduce their company's water footprint. Join individuals and businesses across our region in their commitment to saving water!

#### **Commitment to Excellence**

In May 2021, we partnered with Georgia Public Broadcasting (GPB) to create "Live Exploration: Georgia's Water." This live virtual field trip gave students and teachers across the state a detailed look at Georgia's water systems and the people who care for them. Over 81,000 students, parents and teachers across the state and beyond participated in the event.

The Metro Water District's impact is recognized at the national level. We received our third WaterSense Sustained Excellence Award from the EPA in 2020. In 2020, for the sixth consecutive year, the EPA also recognized the effectiveness of our innovative and creative approach to promoting WaterSense and water efficiency,

contributing to the region's decline in per capita water use.

#### **Partnerships**

Since 2001, we have worked in partnership with local water utilities and authorities to create regional educational requirements that are implemented locally. Utility educators spend countless hours developing their own local programs that, combined with our programs, produce significant regional impact. We support these front-line educational efforts by providing thousands of materials and resources annually that range from pamphlets to puppet shows. Yes, we even host puppet shows.

We invest in education programs because water is the foundation for healthy communities and strong economies. But protecting this resource takes all of us.

Do your part – use water efficiently, keep our waterways clean, and remember – scrape food into the trash, not the sink!

*Sarah Skinner is the Education and Public Awareness Coordinator at the Metro Water District.*



### **Annual Education Activities**

- **Middle School Essay Contest** due October 8, 2021 ([northgeorgiawater.org/essay](http://northgeorgiawater.org/essay))
- **Water Drop Dash T-Shirt Contest** due February 11, 2022 ([waterdropdash.com/tshirt](http://waterdropdash.com/tshirt))
- **Water Drop Dash 5K and Water Festival Celebrating US EPA WaterSense Fix a Leak Week** March 19, 2022 ([waterdropdash.com](http://waterdropdash.com))
- **High School Video Contest** due in April each year ([northgeorgiawater.org/video](http://northgeorgiawater.org/video))
- **Children's Water Festival Celebrates Drinking Water Week** each May ([cleanwatercampaign.org/waterfest](http://cleanwatercampaign.org/waterfest))
- **Calendar Photo Contest** rolling submissions all year ([northgeorgiawater.org/calendar](http://northgeorgiawater.org/calendar))

Visit [northgeorgiawater.org](http://northgeorgiawater.org) for more information about all of our programs.

# PARTNERSHIP

The Metro Water District is a shining example of public-private collaboration in our region. Congratulations to all of the stakeholders who have made such a difference for metro Atlanta.



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