

R.I. environmentalists want economic development, too

HAROLD WARD

BILL FALCONE'S harsh criticism of environmental groups is puzzling ("Who squandered R.I.'s wet wealth?" Jan. 17). After more than 500 intemperate words excoriating environmentalists, he proposes exactly what the Coalition for Water Security has been advocating for two years: 1) that water should be budgeted and allocated to essential needs, 2) that the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management should set standards to provide a baseline for the water budget and 3) that the state Water Resources Board should allocate the available water.

Falcone believes "these people do not want Quonset fully developed; they see a water supply bottleneck as a way to stop future development, and a way to impose more government control over the people's use of water." If by "these people" he means the Coalition for Water Security, he is mistaken. The coalition advocates the policies named above explicitly because water should be diverted from wasteful use, like the over-watering of lawns, and made available for economic development at Quonset and elsewhere. The Rhode Island Economic Policy Council is a member of the coalition because efficient water use and management are vital to a thriving economy.

Falcone seems particularly frustrated that his former long-time employer, the Water Resources Board, was unable to construct a reservoir in the Big River in the early '90s. He neglects to mention the primary reason — that the Environmental Protection Agency found that there was not adequate demand to justify the environmental cost. The option of constructing a Big River reservoir has been examined again in Senate hearings over the past two years. The estimated cost of constructing a reservoir with half the capacity of the Scituate reservoir is \$1.2 billion, and that reservoir could not be fully on-line for more than a decade. More efficient use of water, on the other hand, could immediately lower costs and, along with an expanded distribution, make available the water necessary for economic development.

Perhaps Mr. Falcone, after he returns from sunny (and very dry) Sarasota, should present his plea

directly to the Rhode Island legislature and explain how, while facing budget shortfalls of almost half a billion dollars, they could fund the up-front cost of a new reservoir at nearly three times the shortfall amount. So far, the state hasn't even come up with the \$30 million to \$40 million necessary to put wells in the Big River aquifer.

The Coalition for Water Security would like to thank Bill Falcone for bringing to the public and decision-makers key points of the legislation being promoted this year at the General Assembly by our partnership of environmental and economic groups. We have to work together to manage the state's water supply to meet our current and future needs.

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