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Metro area risks billions in business if water wars not resolved

by John F. Schaffner

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Georgia has until July 17, 2012, to find a solution to the tri-state "water war" or face a potential reduction in the metro region's economic output by \$26 billion to \$39 billion a year, the president of the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce recently told a packed meeting of the Buckhead Business Association.

Speaking at the BBA's weekly breakfast meeting Jan. 28 at the City Club of Buckhead, Sam A. Williams, said three "C's" hold the solution to two decades of fighting between Alabama, Georgia and Florida over rights to water that flows from Lake Lanier down the Chattahoochee River to the Gulf Coast.

He said the three "C's" are: conserve more water, capture more water and control and manage water resources.

On July 17, federal Judge Paul Magnuson of Minnesota ruled Georgia -- and specifically Atlanta -- must get congressional approval to continue to use Lake Lanier for a drinking water source or else it would only be allowed to tap it for about half of its current water supply. The state has until July 17, 2012, to come up with a solution, and has appealed the judge's decision.

"I think we've got a pretty good chance to settle things with Alabama, partly because the Chattahoochee does not feed into that state. It only borders Alabama," Williams said. "Florida is going to be a real challenge."

Atlanta and Georgia's water problem "is a consequence of our success," Williams told the business group. "If we hadn't grown so fast we would not have this problem. This is not a war over water. It is a war over prosperity."

Williams said the metro Atlanta area currently uses 680 million gallons of water a day and would be forced to replace 250 million to 280 million gallons a day by some other means if the judgment stands. The metropolitan Atlanta area consumes less than 2 percent of the water in the Chattahoochee River.

Williams said Gov. Sonny Perdue has adopted a multi-pronged strategy to address the problem. The state is appealing the judge's decision, negotiating with Alabama and Florida, working to obtain congressional reauthorization to use the lake water as directed by the judge and developing contingency plans to address the gap in supply.

Williams is a member of a Water Contingency Planning Task Force of business leaders convened by Gov. Perdue and pulled together by the metro Atlanta and state chambers of commerce. The task force was convened to address the gap in supply and on Jan. 21, a report was released on the task force's findings and recommendations.

Williams pointed out that a new reservoir has not been built since Lake Lanier was constructed in 1949, when the metro area's population was 530,000, a tenth of what it is today.

“Judge Magnuson said Lake Lanier was built only for flood control, power generation and navigation, and that (Georgia has) no legal right to use the lake for drinking water,” Williams explained.

According to a chamber analysis, if there is a water shortfall, Gwinnett and Forsyth counties would suffer the most, losing 95 percent or more of their water supply. Fulton and DeKalb counties would be restricted to 20 to 50 percent less than they collect today. Other metro counties have their own reservoirs and would suffer less.

To replace that water, the task force considered options including building a new reservoir, which would take more than a decade, and running a pipe from Fairburn to Gwinnett County to pump potable water from the Chattahoochee back into the system. That would cost about \$5 billion he said.