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“Deal-O-Meter” Spinning. Bills to Skyrocket?

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The Atlanta *Journal Constitution*’s PolitiFact “Deal-O-Meter” feature recently vetted Gov. Nathan Deal’s campaign promise to increase water supply in Georgia. The AJC rated this as a [“Promise Kept.”](#) This assessment is troubling for a number of reasons.

Deal technically began to follow through on his promise when he created the Governor’s Water Supply Task Force in 2010. The Task Force in turn recommended that the [Georgia Environmental Finance Authority](#) (GEFA) manage a new loan and grant program to fund water supply projects. The Governor’s Water Supply Program (GWSP) was explicitly designed to facilitate projects that would provide [“an adequate supply of clean and affordable water,”](#) according to the Governor’s January 2011 directive.

As I have noted [in a previous post](#), the GWSP excluded water efficiency and conservation projects, thus making proven and cost-effective water supply solutions ineligible while favoring reservoir [“money pits.”](#)

The Governor’s promise and directive do not square-up with the [GWSP Round I awards](#) that total of \$99,550,000 in tax-payer dollars. There are lots of ways to slice and dice the awards. For example, the awards fit into three categories: short-term solutions, long-term solutions, and free money.

Another way to view the awards: of the eight awards, six projects – or \$91,160,000 worth – will not supply clean and affordable water supplies for years – if ever. Of the eight awards, two projects alone – totaling \$9,060,000 – are not water supply projects and will not provide clean and affordable water to Georgians who are currently in need of water

Short-term: Three projects easily fit in this category. The City of Cornelia will dredge an existing sixty-year old reservoir plus build a new 30 million gallon reservoir that apparently does not require a Clean Water Act Section 404 Permit, according to the GWSP application. In 2007, the city was apparently within six days of running out of water to serve its customers. This included the Fieldale Farms Corporation’s poultry processing plant, which “is not only Cornelia’s largest water customer; it is also its largest employer.” As worth noting: Joseph “Joe” M. Hatfield is a Fieldale executive and a member of Georgia’s [Board of Natural Resources](#).

The City of Hahira will drill a new water-well to increase capacity in existing elevated water towers. And the City of Vienna will drill a new well and build a new water tank to supply their town and preserve jobs associated with a Tyson chicken processing plant. Total price tag for the three projects: \$8,390, 866 in GWSP loans.

Long-term, if ever: Three new reservoir projects – in [Newton County](#) (Bear Creek), [Ocnee and Walton Counties](#) ([Hard Labor Creek](#)), and [Paulding County](#) ([Richland Creek](#)) dominate the field. The first and second of the proposed reservoirs are outside of the Metro North Georgia Water Planning District and the Apalachicola-Chattahoochee-Flint River basin – and thus not geographically located in the region where the water is most needed.

The third proposed reservoir is located in the Alabama-Coosa-Tallapoosa River basin. And this project, according to one online commentary, has [allegedly](#) been a pet of Georgia State Senate hopeful [Bill Carruth](#), also a former Board of Natural Resources member.

All three reservoirs have been shepherded through the state and federal permitting process at one time or another by one consultant – Newton County’s county attorney and a member of the Metro North Georgia Water District board – [Tommy Craig](#). All of the projects have been justified on population projections and growth bubbles recently popped by the Great Recession. At least Ocnee County’s Chief Financial Officer [acknowledges this fact](#) – but remains happy to take the loot and put existing water utility rate payers on the hook. Total tax dollars headed to these “[money pits](#)”: \$82,100,000 in GEFA loans.

Free Money: Any political enthusiast interested in ethics, the [flow of lobbyist money](#), and wasteful government spending should find the remaining projects interesting. Georgia taxpayers are set to pour a direct state investment of \$9,060,000 in free grants into a stream flow augmentation experiment in the lower Flint River basin and a Lake Lanier resort that includes a [water park](#).

The [Southwest Georgia Regional Commission’s](#) Flint River aquifer storage and recovery project – which will utilize the services of former Commissioner of the Department of Natural Resources Joe Tanner’s [consulting group](#) – will test a concept and will not create a new water supply.

And the [Lake Lanier Island’s Development Authority](#) – a public-private partnership chaired by former Commissioner of the Department of Natural Resources Lonice Barrett – will develop a water supply well so they do not have to buy water from the City of Gainesville to operate “resort facilities” including hotels, a golf course and a “water park,” according to the GWSP application. The lease to operate the resort facilities on state land is held by Virgil Williams, a one-time advisor to former Gov. Zell Miller and [campaign contributor](#) to Gov. Deal.

As Georgia legislators bow to anti-tax interests ([see epic TSPLOST failure](#)) and fail to fix the region’s transportation woes; as they slash education spending and cut the Department of Natural Resources’ budget (think state parks, like [Watson Mill Bridge](#)) – the GWSP will dump \$4.5 million into an exclusive water-resort and more than \$80 million into consultants’ pockets for

projects that may never produce a drop of drinking water for numerous financial and environmental reasons.

Gov. Deal may be a campaign promise keeper, but his methods – while legal – appear to reward campaign contributors and their “kin” while leaving the rest of Georgia’s taxpayers and municipal water customers indebted like the great unwashed.

-Chris Manganiello