

2026 Water Policy Forum Pre-Read Briefing

Since Current and Metropolitan Planning Council first convened Illinois water leaders in 2020 at the [Vision for Water: A Past, Present, and Future of Water](#), we have been building the case that Illinois faces a choice—not just a challenge—to treat our water resources as central to the state’s ability to thrive in the future.

Illinois is not unique. Across the globe, water systems are under pressures that existing governance frameworks were never built to manage. The 2026 UN University's [Global Water Bankruptcy report](#) describes the condition precisely: when societies draw down water faster than it can be replenished—spending savings rather than income—the damage to water resources and ecosystems can become irreversible. That dynamic is not limited to arid regions. It is arriving here, in different forms, and at an accelerating pace.

In Illinois, the pressures are familiar and compounding. [Data centers are being sited](#) with minimal understanding of cumulative water demand. Home rule structures that protect local autonomy can also impede the regional coordination our watersheds require. Groundwater governance has not kept pace with the scale of extraction or with climate change. [Water law has not kept pace](#) with any of it. Communities—urban and rural—are being asked to deliver safe, affordable drinking water from systems that decades of underinvestment have left fragile.

And yet Illinois has something most of the world does not: time, assets, and the civic capacity to act. We sit at the intersection of three major water basins. We have world-class research infrastructure. We have the organizations, the expertise, and— we believe—the political conditions for a different kind of water future.

This Forum is not designed to resolve these tensions. It is designed to hold them honestly and to ask whether the partnerships, frameworks, and political will exist to turn Illinois’ water advantages into durable water systems that protect public health and secure our economy.

That is why we have invited guests who will challenge our assumptions and help chart our course. We hope this room will do the same.

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Event Purpose

For decades, organizations in this room have been working to connect water policy to the broader questions shaping Illinois' future.

Work ranging from MPC's [Changing Course report](#)—produced with the Campaign for Sensible Growth and Openlands—to Current's [Upstream Illinois strategy](#) has linked our region's water resources to economic development, land use, infrastructure investment, and regional growth.

This Forum builds on that tradition.

It is not designed to produce a policy platform. It is designed to create space for cross-sector dialogue about the pressures now reshaping water systems in Illinois.

The purpose of this pre-read is to establish a condition, not a conclusion. Illinois faces water pressures that are real, accelerating, and arriving into a governance structure that is not designed to manage them effectively for the challenges of today. That is not an argument for a particular policy, but a call for the kind of honest, cross-sector conversation this Forum is designed to foster.

The questions that follow are genuinely open. They are the questions this room is well positioned to wrestle with—and the questions the World Café discussions are designed to explore.

- Who is missing from the decisions that shape Illinois' water future—and what would it take to change that?
- What tools and frameworks does the economic development community need to understand about water that it currently doesn't—and what does the water community need to understand about economic development?
- What has worked elsewhere that Illinois has not tried—and what makes Illinois distinct enough that outside models may not transfer?
- What can technology actually solve—and what problems will persist regardless of what innovation delivers?
- What role can natural systems—restored wetlands, green infrastructure, watershed-scale conservation—play in Illinois' water future, and what would it take to integrate them into planning and investment decisions?
- Where are the biggest and most material gaps between vision and implementation: funding, financial models and incentives, communicating the value, political will?
- What would it take to move from reactive intervention to durable coordination—and who has the standing to lead that shift?

We do not expect this Forum to answer these questions. We expect it to advance them—to surface the tensions, identify leverage points, and begin building the cross-sector understanding that durable water policy requires.

What happens after this room disperses is, in part, up to the people in it.

The Abundance Illusion

Look at a map of Illinois and water appears to be everywhere. The state sits astride the Upper Mississippi and Ohio River systems, shares the shoreline of Lake Michigan, and draws on one of the world's great aquifer networks beneath its interior. The Great Lakes alone hold roughly [21 percent of the world's surface freshwater](#). From above, scarcity seems like someone else's problem.

It isn't.

Globally, water risk and demand are moving in one direction: up. This is already raising the value of our water resources here in the Great Lakes, and the trends will only sharpen. Locally, variation and extremes are becoming our new normal: too wet, too dry, too dirty are all problems demanding our closer attention and resources.

In March 2026, [more than 80 percent of Illinois was under drought conditions](#)—19 counties in extreme drought—while the state operated without a meaningful water management framework. As Prairie Rivers Network reminds us in a recent op-ed, Water law here is still rooted in 19th-century English common law, a system designed for a different landscape, a different economy, and a different set of pressures.

Nearly [90 percent of the state's historic wetlands are gone](#)—not an abstraction, but the loss of the natural systems that once filtered drinking water, buffered floods, recharged aquifers, and sustained the agricultural economy. That ecological infrastructure was destroyed over generations. Nothing was built in its place.

None of this is visible on the map.

These are the framing conditions for this Forum, and the conditions this room is well positioned to begin changing.

Pressure, Arriving Faster than Plans

Illinois has often managed water reactively—responding to crises once they become undeniable, building infrastructure after the need is acute, and negotiating regional solutions only after local systems begin to fail.

What's different now is the pace.

The rapid expansion of data centers has arrived faster than any planning process was designed to handle. Illinois now hosts the highest concentration of data centers in the

Great Lakes region, and [energy demand from those facilities is projected to nearly triple between 2030 and 2040.](#)

The water implications remain largely invisible. Local permitting processes rarely require cumulative water demand analysis, and Illinois lacks any statewide disclosure framework for water use associated with new facilities.

Yet data center siting decisions are simultaneously water supply decisions, land use decisions, energy infrastructure commitments, and economic development strategies—each made by different actors, through different processes, with little shared visibility.

Communities are making irreversible commitments about land, infrastructure, and water allocations without a shared framework for understanding the cumulative demand those decisions create.

The tradeoffs are real. Data centers bring jobs, tax revenue, and investment. But nationally, two-thirds of facilities built since 2022 have been [located in water-stressed regions, and concentrated clusters can increase regional water stress by as much as 17 percent.](#)

Whether those tradeoffs are worth making—and under what conditions—is exactly the kind of question Illinois currently lacks a process for answering.

What is striking is not that Illinois faces water pressure. It is that multiple pressures are arriving simultaneously: drought, aging infrastructure, industrial demand, federal disinvestment, and governance systems that were thin to begin with.

Each is manageable in isolation. Together, they are stress-testing a system that was never designed to handle them at once.

A System Built for the Past

Illinois' water governance structure reflects decisions made over more than a century.

Nearly 90 percent of historic wetlands were drained over the 19th and 20th centuries. The ecological services they provided—water filtration, flood buffering, aquifer recharge—did not disappear when those landscapes were altered. They became costs: higher treatment expenses, flood damage, aquifer depletion, and public health burdens.

Yet the governance architecture that might have replaced those lost systems—regional planning institutions, watershed management frameworks, coordinated infrastructure strategies—was never constructed in their place.

Instead, Illinois operates through a patchwork of sector-specific authorities, none with the mandate or the tools to manage water as a connected system.

The infrastructure gap that resulted is not a recent failure. It is the accumulated result of decades of underinvestment.

The federal government once funded roughly half of the nation's water capital investment. [Today that share has fallen to roughly 7 percent.](#) \$2 trillion Water bills have risen faster than inflation for decades, yet [the national backlog in water infrastructure investment is now estimated at \\$2 trillion.](#)

Communities left furthest behind are not randomly distributed. Capacity gaps are sharpest in small urban and rural systems—places without dedicated technical staff, planning capacity, or political influence over the decisions shaping their water supply.

Understanding that condition is essential to understanding what this Forum is actually for.

What Coordination Actually Requires

The challenge Illinois faces is not a lack of knowledge. It is that knowledge lives in silos.

The decisions that matter most happen at the intersections between sectors.

A single large data center project implicates water supply, energy infrastructure, land use planning, economic development incentives, and environmental permitting—often simultaneously. Yet no single agency or institution owns that intersection.

Economic development offices rarely track water stress. Water utilities are seldom involved when site selection decisions are made. Land use planning rarely accounts for cumulative resource demand.

The result is not intentional. It is structural: institutions each doing their job, none positioned to see the whole system.

The coordination deficit compounds. [Every \\$1 million invested in water infrastructure generates roughly \\$2.5 million in economic output and supports more than 10 jobs.](#) Capturing that return requires knowing where investment is most needed, sequencing it with other infrastructure decisions, and directing resources toward communities that cannot wait for the market to discover them

That math does not work in a fragmented system.

The question of who is at the table is not rhetorical—it is structural.

Major water decisions in Illinois are made across dozens of jurisdictions, by authorities with overlapping mandates, in processes not designed for the pace or complexity of what is arriving. The communities most affected—small systems, rural municipalities, and places with limited technical capacity—are often the least equipped to participate in the decisions that shape their options.

Texas offers a recent illustration of what building coordination can look like. The state reframed water as an economic competitiveness issue, assembled cross-sector coalitions, and [secured voter approval for funding that could invest up to \\$1 billion annually in water infrastructure](#).

Even that effort falls far short of Texas' estimated \$154 billion infrastructure need. Passing a funding mechanism is not the same as building a management system.

Illinois enters this moment with significant advantages: world-class research infrastructure, a strong civic sector with deep water expertise, and geographic access to freshwater that most of the country would trade almost anything for.

[Great Lakes RENEW](#), one of nine inaugural National Science Foundation Regional Innovation Engines announced in 2024, is a rare new long-duration, large-scale investment in the frontiers of water resource management in the Great Lakes. Framed as a challenge to move from “waste to wealth,” accelerating the transition to a circular water economy in our region, it aims to accelerate the development and deployment of both technology and policy solutions. Illinois is the home base of this multi-state effort, and its cross-sector water leaders are major beneficiaries of resources to build the next generation of technologies, talent, and collaborative infrastructure to drive towards a more sustainable water future for the people, economies, and environments of our region.

The question is whether the people and institutions in this room can build the conditions—the framing, the coalitions, and the political will—that those assets have so far not been enough to produce.

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