

Water's potential clear to McCulloch

Oakland County Water Resources Commissioner John McCulloch spent more than a year trying to give the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department \$300,000 in state funds to test new technology that detects leaks before they become costly sinkholes.

Although the Detroit system reports losing 14%-17% of its water to leaky pipes — McCulloch says he thinks it may be more like 30% — he couldn't sell DWSD officials on an idea that could save a lot of repair money, not to mention a lot of water.

"Very frustrating," McCulloch said in an interview last week. "Detroit could really use this technology. We demonstrated it works. ... But DWSD had leadership changes, issues with contractors, and like most water systems, is very risk-averse. Change comes slowly.

"So, I called Grand Rapids."



OAKLAND OFFICIAL IS LURING FIRMS TO MICHIGAN, RON DZWONKOWSKI FINDS

And that is where the technology is being installed for a pilot project that could soon be exported from Michigan to water systems around the country.

Give McCulloch credit for not giving up on an important idea — and for being one of the people in Michigan who is actively trying to promote water technology as a growth segment for the economy in the state, where water is an abundant and underappreciated asset.

McCulloch used his office,

formerly known as the Drain Commissioner, to set up a nonprofit called H2Opportunities to promote Michigan as a development ground for water cleaning, conservation and utilization technologies — all in demand around the world. H2Opportunities has no staff and pays no salaries but goes after state, federal and foundation grants that become capital to attract companies such as Israel-based Miya — developer of the leak-detection system — to Michigan.

"What we require then is that if they develop something here that can be marketed, they do the production here," McCulloch explained.

In addition to Miya, H2Opportunities has brought three other companies to Michigan. One is testing a process to extract electricity from wastewater. Another is developing modular water treatment equip-



OAKLAND COUNTY John McCulloch's nonprofit H2Opportunities promotes Michigan as a development ground for water technologies.

ment that would be useful, for example, in residential areas where septic capacity has been exhausted. A demonstration system is being installed at a sprawling year-round camp near Evart in the northern Lower Peninsula. Yet another company is amplifying for

water treatment the medical technology that's used to inject oxygen into blood without causing dangerous bubbles.

"It's another way we could treat wastewater or clean lagoons," McCulloch explained.

Just before Thanksgiving, McCulloch made his third visit to Israel, renowned for water conservation technology, where he spoke at the Watec biennial global water conference. There, he says, he made contacts with six other companies that will be pursued to build their beachheads in Michigan for the North American water-system market.

"The key is testing this stuff. The challenge of water technology is getting it to a market. We want to be the place where we can show that it works," McCulloch said. "The opportunity to validate a product is very big to these companies, because water systems deal with health and

safety issues and they move very slowly. ... They need trusted technology."

In Michigan, this kind of stuff also can be tested and demonstrated at fairly low risk since problems are unlikely to leave anybody high and dry for long.

The name of McCulloch's nonprofit says it all. With water, water everywhere, Michigan is awash in H2Opportunities if we're willing to look at our big, blue resource in bold new ways.

Rather than seeing it as mainly a source of fish, recreation and natural wonder, "I think it may become our bargaining chip," McCulloch said. "Industry needs water. Food processors need water."

And we all know what Michigan needs. John McCulloch is trying to deliver it.

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