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SYNOPSIS
Provides for establishment of New Jersey Water Infrastructure Center at institute of higher education designated by DEP; appropriates $5 million.

CURRENT VERSION OF TEXT
As introduced.
AN ACT concerning the establishment of a water infrastructure research, innovation, and data collection center in New Jersey, supplementing Title 18A of the Revised Statutes, and making an appropriation.

BE IT ENACTED by the Senate and General Assembly of the State of New Jersey:

1. The Legislature finds and declares the following:

   a. Human life, health, and prosperity is directly dependent on, and affected by, water infrastructure systems for the daily availability and accessibility of clean drinking water and the effective and appropriate treatment and management of wastewater and stormwater flows.

   b. Although New Jersey has some well-run water infrastructure systems, many of the State’s water infrastructure systems are inadequate, and all of its water systems face significant challenges in ensuring their continued efficient and effective operations. These challenges include, but are not limited to, the need to correct unresolved legacy issues involving lead service lines and combined sewer systems, the need to upgrade and replace aging water-related infrastructure, the need to comply with new regulatory requirements for emerging contaminants, and the need to address growing threats arising from climate change, including increases in rainfall intensity and harmful algal blooms (i.e., cyanobacteria infestations).

   c. All residents depend on robust and reliable water systems, but low-income populations and persons of color are more likely than others to experience negative impacts associated with poor water resource management in the State.

   d. Many consumers in the State already find their water and sewer bills to be unaffordable, which ultimately impedes the ability of water suppliers and sewer service providers to establish rate increases or engage in capital investment projects, thereby reducing their ability to meet regulatory mandates and facilitate job creation and economic stimulus in the community.

   e. Significant investments in water infrastructure are now being made by the federal and State governments, and the federal water infrastructure spending proposals and availability of dedicated State funding in this area is offering New Jersey a once-in-a-generation opportunity to jumpstart not only new projects, but a new way of doing water-related business in the State.

   f. Based on the foregoing, it is both reasonable and necessary for the State to establish a center for water infrastructure research, innovation, and data collection, at an institution of higher education in the State, to: engage in the cross-disciplinary study of the State’s water infrastructure systems and all water-related issues affecting local governments, utilities, and consumers in the State; identify critical improvements to the State’s drinking water, wastewater, and
stormwater systems; and work cooperatively with stakeholders to
develop innovative solutions to the State’s existing and emerging
water-related problems and help facilitate their implementation.

2. a. Within one year after the effective date of this act, the
New Jersey Water Infrastructure Center shall be established, and
shall commence operations, at a public institution of higher
education designated by the Department of Environmental
Protection, pursuant to subsection a. of section 3 of this act. The
purpose of the center shall be to:

(1) identify and promote policy and management methods to
facilitate the transformation of the State’s water infrastructure
systems, as necessary to ensure that those systems are effectively
delivering quality drinking water, wastewater, and stormwater
services, throughout the State, at the lowest long-term cost; are
providing all residents of every community in the State with
quality, affordable, and clean drinking water; are adequately
funded; are operating efficiently and remain in a state of good
repair; and are providing multiple benefits to their host
communities, including, but not limited to, clean water and
waterways, local jobs, flood and climate change resilience,
economic growth, and healthier, safer neighborhoods;

(2) collect and bring together cross-disciplinary data, applied
research, and stakeholders to accelerate the development and
implementation of effective and innovative water infrastructure
policies, water resource management practices, and solutions to
problems facing water utilities and system owners and operators;
and

(3) ensure that all stakeholders, including, but not limited to,
consumers, local government officials, water infrastructure
departments and utilities, policymakers, regulators, and advocates,
have easy and transparent access to all available water-related data
and metrics generated by the center.

b. The center shall have the duty to engage in critical analysis;
provide relevant information to, and encourage and facilitate
colaboration among, stakeholders; and develop new and innovative
strategies and solutions to address water-related problems in the
State, as may be necessary to effectuate the purposes outlined in
subsection a. of this section. The center shall, at a minimum,
provide the following programs and services, to the extent feasible
with available funds:

(1) a data collection and dissemination program that uses a
transparent, accessible, up-to-date online data dashboard to provide
stakeholders with water systems performance data, benchmarking
data, data on Statewide trends in water usage and supply, and other
relevant data and statistics relevant to water infrastructure, supply,
utilities, or resource management in the State;
an applied research program that provides and facilitates cross-disciplinary policy and management research and identifies cutting-edge, data-driven solutions to problems affecting State-level water policy development, water systems operators, and the design of water systems. Focus areas may include, but need not be limited to:

(a) the legal, financial, organizational, training, and capacity constraints that prevent the adoption, by water system owners and operators, of improved, state-of-the-art, or innovative approaches to water system management;

(b) the means and methods to be used by water system owners and operators in developing, implementing, and managing customer affordability programs;

(c) public perspectives on water infrastructure issues; and

(d) the means and methods to be used in better integrating clean drinking water into the State’s communities, particularly those communities that are stressed or are lacking sufficient access to clean drinking water;

(3) a small grants program that provides financial assistance to institutions of higher education in the State to enable those institutions to fund independent research related to the State’s water supply, water infrastructure, or management of water resources;

(4) a stakeholder collaboration program that uses educational newsletters and group meetings to help foster a constructive dialogue among stakeholders on water-related issues; and

(5) a water service innovation program that facilitates active engagement and cooperation among, and the development and maintenance of connections and ongoing relationships between, institutions of higher education and water system owners and operators, planners, policymakers, regulators, and other relevant parties, for the purpose of encouraging and better enabling the collective development of new and innovative water management and infrastructure strategies and solutions.

c. The center shall be authorized to seek additional funding from State, federal, or other sources, beyond the funding appropriated pursuant to section 5 of this act, as may be necessary to strengthen and expand the center’s programming. For example, the center may seek additional funding to establish programs and initiatives such as the following:

(1) a consumer connections program that facilitates engagement and the development and maintenance of connections between water service consumers and the owners and operators of the local water systems that serve them;

(2) a technical assistance program to help at-risk water systems implement cost-saving strategies, including, but not limited to, regionalization strategies, climate resiliency strategies, water-energy nexus strategies, and staff capacity-building strategies; and
(3) a water workforce training and connections program that provides training courses and otherwise facilitates the creation of employment pipelines between water systems, local communities, and educational institutions in the State to effectuate an increase in the State’s water workforce.

d. One year after the center is established pursuant to this act, and annually thereafter, it shall submit to the Governor and, pursuant to section 2 of P.L.1991, c.164 (C.52:14-19.1), to the Legislature, a written report describing the programs the center has implemented and activities it has undertaken pursuant to this act; the actual and anticipated effects of those programs and activities on the State’s water systems, drinking water supply, and water consumers; the center’s priorities for the upcoming year; and the additional resources, if any, that the center needs to properly effectuate its mission. Each report prepared pursuant to this subsection shall also be published on the Internet websites of the Department of Environmental Protection and the institution of higher education that is hosting the center.

3. a. Not more than six months after the effective date of this act, the Department of Environmental Protection shall designate, through a competitive selection process, an institution of higher education to host the New Jersey Water Infrastructure Center established pursuant to this act.

b. The Department of Environmental Protection shall additionally:

   (1) provide advice and assistance to guide the operations of the center;
   (2) provide relevant data and research assistance to the center, upon request, as may be necessary for the center to perform its duties and implement its programs;
   (3) identify topics of concern and research areas that should be addressed, through the center’s programs, services, and activities, to the extent feasible given existing funding and ongoing research efforts; and
   (4) identify, and provide for the center to implement, new programs, services, or activities, not already identified in this act, which are related to water infrastructure, water resource management, or drinking water quality or supplies in the State.

4. The New Jersey Water Infrastructure Center shall be authorized, in effectuating its duties pursuant to this act, to consult, coordinate, and collaborate with all relevant stakeholders, as well as with the Board of Public Utilities; the Water Supply Advisory Council; the New Jersey Clean Water Council; the New Jersey Climate Change Alliance at Rutgers, the State University; the Water Resources Program at Rutgers, the State University; the New Jersey Water Resources Research Institute at Rutgers, the State University;
the New Jersey Center for Water Science and Technology at Montclair University; the New Jersey Water Science Center at the United States Geological Survey; Jersey Water Works and the Jersey WaterCheck data hub; and any other entity that: provides research, analysis, or education on water infrastructure, water quality, or other water-related issues; develops solutions to water infrastructure, water supply, or water resource management problems; compiles or consolidates water-related data or metrics; or provides assistance in the development or effective implementation of water data hubs.

5. There is appropriated, from the General Fund to the Department of Environmental Protection, the sum of $5,000,000 for the purposes of financing the establishment and operations of the New Jersey Water Infrastructure Center pursuant to this act.

6. This act shall take effect immediately.

STATEMENT

This bill would provide for the establishment of a New Jersey Water Infrastructure Center (center) at a public institution of higher education designated by the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP). The bill would require the DEP’s designation to be made pursuant to a competitive selection process and not more than six months after the bill’s effective date, and it would further require the center to commence its operations within one year after the bill’s effective date.

The three-fold purpose of the center would be to: (1) identify and promote policy and management methods to facilitate the transformation of the State’s water infrastructure systems, as necessary to ensure that these systems are effectively delivering quality drinking water, wastewater, and stormwater services at the lowest long-term cost; are providing all residents of every community in the State with quality, affordable, and clean drinking water; are adequately funded; are operating efficiently and remain in a state of good repair; and provide multiple benefits to their host communities, including, but not limited to, clean water and waterways, local jobs, flood and climate change resilience, economic growth, and healthier, safer neighborhoods; (2) collect and bring together cross-disciplinary data, applied research, and stakeholders to accelerate the development and implementation of effective water infrastructure policies, water resource management practices, and solutions to problems facing water utilities and system owners and operators; and (3) ensure that all stakeholders, including, but not limited to, consumers, local government officials, water infrastructure departments and utilities, policymakers,
regulators, and advocates, have easy and transparent access to all
available water-related data and metrics generated by the center.

The center would have the duty to: engage in critical analysis;
provide relevant information to, and encourage cooperation among
stakeholders; and develop new strategies and solutions, as may be
necessary to effectuate its purposes. The center would be required
to provide, at a minimum, the following programs and services, to
the extent feasible with available funds:

(1) a data collection and dissemination program that uses an
accessible, up-to-date online data dashboard to provide stakeholders
with water systems performance data, benchmarking data, data on
Statewide trends in water usage and supply, and other relevant data
and statistics relevant to water infrastructure, supply, utilities, or
resource management in the State;

(2) an applied research program that provides and facilitates
cross-disciplinary policy and management research and identifies
cutting-edge, data-driven solutions to problems affecting State-level
water policy development, water systems operators, and the design
of water systems;

(3) a small grants program that provides financial assistance to
institutions of higher education in the State, in order to enable those
institutions to fund independent research related to the State’s water
supply, water infrastructure, or management of water resources;

(4) a stakeholder collaboration program that uses educational
newsletters and group meetings to help foster a constructive
dialogue among stakeholders on water-related issues; and

(5) a water service innovation program that facilitates active
engagement and cooperation among, and the development and
maintenance of connections and ongoing relationships between,
institutions of higher education and water system owners and
operators, planners, policymakers, regulators, and other relevant
parties, for the purpose of encouraging and better enabling the
collective development of new and innovative water management
and infrastructure strategies and solutions.

The bill would appropriate $5 million from the General Fund for
the purposes of financing the establishment and operations of the
center.

The bill would further authorize the center to seek additional
funding, from State, federal, or other sources, as may be necessary
to strengthen and expand the center’s programming. For example,
the center would be authorized to seek additional funding to
establish programs and initiatives such as the following:

(1) a consumer connections program that facilitates engagement
and the development and maintenance of connections between
water service consumers and the owners and operators of the local
water systems that serve them;

(2) a technical assistance program to help at-risk water systems
implement cost-saving strategies, including, but not limited to,
regionalization strategies, climate resiliency strategies, water-
energy nexus strategies, and staff capacity-building strategies; or
(3) a water workforce training and connections program that
provides training courses and otherwise facilitates the creation of
employment pipelines between water systems, local communities,
and educational institutions in the State to effectuate an increase in
the State’s water workforce.

One year after the center is established, and annually thereafter,
it would be required to submit a written report, to the Governor and
Legislature, describing: the programs the center has implemented
and the activities it has undertaken; the actual and anticipated
effects of those programs and activities on the State’s water
systems, drinking water supply, and water consumers; the center’s
priorities for the upcoming year; and the additional resources, if
any, that the center needs to properly effectuate its mission. Each
report would also be published on the Internet websites of the
Department of Environmental Protection and of the institution of
higher education that is hosting the center.

The bill would require the Department of Environmental
Protection to: (1) provide advice and assistance to guide the
operations of the center; (2) provide relevant data and research
assistance to the center, upon request, as may be necessary for the
center to perform its duties and implement its programs; (3) identify
topics of concern and research areas that should be addressed,
through the center’s programs, services, and activities, to the extent
feasible given existing funding and ongoing research efforts; and
(4) identify, and provide for the center to implement, new programs,
services, or activities, not already identified in the bill, which are
related to water infrastructure, water resource management, or
drinking water quality or supplies in the State.