Regional planning to protect water rights is discussed during a SUNY New Paltz event

"New Paltz is the only community in New York State that doesn't have an alternative backup source in place," said Gail Freedman.

"It takes a gallon of water to produce just one almond," she said, using a statistic that has made the term "almond shaming" popular. "We need to develop more resilient systems than relying on California's almond orchards." Freedman, a member of the grassroots organization KingstonCitizens.org, pointed out that preference towards large businesses. "We must demand transparency as citizens." She advocated for regional planning approaches that consider the entire community rather than a handful of vested interests.

"We are water rich, but with climate change, no one really knows what kind of business we want to attract," Berky said. "Can we look at what our land can support and attract those uses, rather than the other way around?"

Freedman concluded with a call to action: "We need to think in terms of watersheds, rather than the individual stream or pond that is being considered for a particular use. The watershed approach also includes protecting the wetlands from which aquifers are replenished. It's so much better to get our water cleaned by nature than do it ourselves, and so much cheaper," she said.

"We need to develop more resilient systems than relying on California for our water," she said.

New laws might make improvements in some cases — for example, restructuring the Kingston Water Board so that the mayor, who appoints the other members, does not sit on it as well. "They are not always needed. The state open meetings law, when applied correctly, creates the transparency panels were calling for," Freedman said. In addition, the State Environmental Quality Review Act (SEQRA) is considered one of the strongest protections in the nation, but is often not well followed. The process calls for additional levels of analysis, and public hearings, if a project meets certain thresholds of disruption to the natural or neighborhood environment, including wetlands destruction, traffic pattern changes and noise pollution. It also forbids the segmenting of a larger project into smaller pieces to no avail the public becomes aware. We must demand transparency as citizens."