

Water conservation law working, utility says

Waukesha use down. 10 percent in 2006

By KOLLIN KOSMICKI Freeman Staff

WAUKESHA -Waukesha is on track to consume about 10 percent less water in 2006 than last year, a sign the new conservation law implemented in May has been successful so far, Waukesha Water Utility officials said.

The Waukesha Water Utility this week confirmed the drop off, a measure through the first seven months of the year and an infusion of enthusiasm for an agency that collided with a roadblock just weeks earlier while it hustles to solve the city's water problems.

The reduction shows that residents are aware of the city's push to conserve water despite the utility's policy for the ordinance's first year against enforcing with citations, said Dan Duchniak, water utility general manager.

"We need to have a program where you can see results and measure results, and we're starting to see some of those impacts," Duchniak said.

Duchniak noted, however, at least part of the reduction can be attributed to a higher-than usual amount of precipitation this summer, but that the conservation ordinance no doubt had a major impact on the decline.

The utility called for a set of water sprinkling restrictions, part of a broader conservation program, with a goal of cutting consumption 20 percent by 2020.

Reducing use is one strategy among many as Waukesha contends with a radium-contaminated deep-aquifer supply and strives to find an alternative source, one option being Lake Michigan. The new law is in effect each year from May 1 to Oct. 1. It restricts watering of lawns and other vegetation to two days a week, Tuesdays and Saturdays for odd-numbered addresses and Thursdays and Sundays for even-numbered addresses.

The utility compared consumption statistics in 2006 with numbers over the past three to five years, Duchniak said.

Going further back would not show as accurate of a comparison. That's because industrial water use already had dropped by about 67 percent over the past 20 to 25 years with some companies closing shop or moving and others implementing their own conservation strategies, Duchniak said.

One example of this year's reduction is that the utility's 18,000 customers used about 10 million gallons on this summer's peak day -which was a sprinkling day, a Tuesday -compared with 14 million gallons used on last year's peak day, Duchniak said.

Utility users historically consume about 7.8 million gallons per day through the year. Utility board President Dan Warren had not heard about the reduction when reached Thursday. He said he was "very, very pleased" about the news.

He stressed, however, that the city needed to continue its education effort because so many new residents enter Waukesha each year and others likely would take for granted the program's success.

"If you're able to educate the people about what you're trying to do, and the methods you implement are simple, then people will understand," Warren said. "If they understand, then they will appreciate what you're trying to do."

Warren said most people with whom he had contact about the law were receptive "because they do understand."

Nancy Quirk, utility technical service manager, said the agency has not needed to warn many residents. Some businesses had issues with automatic sprinklers but were contacted and eventually adjusted those systems.

The utility will continue educating about the law and its purpose, Duchniak said. It has sent letters inviting about 20 residents to join a stakeholders group, which meets for the first time at the end of September, so the public can get more involved, he said.

The utility, meanwhile, is searching for low-radium shallow wells so it can blend with the deep supply and comply with federal radium standards.

The common council, in rejecting an annexation request Aug. 3, left the utility with fewer options in its attempt to tap two shallow wells south of Waukesha that could supply 3 million gallons per day of low-radium water to the system.