

Starting negotiations is in Milwaukee's interest, too

Our View | Water
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The Milwaukee Common Council is expected Friday to take up the question of whether and under what conditions the city should start negotiations with Waukesha on the sale of Lake Michigan water. Fearful that Waukesha will use the sale to expand its size and perhaps lure businesses from Milwaukee, Mayor Tom Barrett says the city should not open negotiations unless any potential sale is limited to Waukesha's current service area, something state and Waukesha officials say is dead on arrival.

Given the region's history of suburban sprawl and white flight from Milwaukee, there's a foundation for Barrett's fears. But we think he's mistaken in this case, and we hope the council approves the start of talks without unreasonable conditions, especially since the city can make millions from such a sale. To bar simply talking about the issue strikes us as shortsighted.

Waukesha is asking for Great Lakes water because it is under federal and state orders to reduce radium levels in its water supply now drawn from an underground aquifer. Its application requires approvals from the state Department of Natural Resources and the other Great Lakes states under the Great Lakes compact. Perhaps approval isn't warranted; environmental and other issues may stand in the way. That's what the DNR will determine.

In regard to Barrett's fears, Waukesha's future service area, which would include parts of neighboring municipalities, has been set by the state and regional planning officials, not by Waukesha. The service area is related to problems with wells in those areas, not any surreptitious plan by Waukesha to expand its size and draw business from Milwaukee. The state has said that the concession Milwaukee is seeking from Waukesha isn't Waukesha's to give.

And as Journal Sentinel reporter Don Behm noted in a [recent story](#), almost all of the potential service area is already filled in; Waukesha won't be expanding at Milwaukee's expense. A report from Milwaukee's own Department of City Development indicated that it appears unlikely that Waukesha would gain any economic development advantage from buying Lake Michigan water.

There's an opportunity here for Milwaukee if - and it's still a big if - the DNR and the other states approve the sale of water to Waukesha. According to the city's own numbers, Milwaukee could make millions and reduce costs for its own water customers. To waste such an opportunity would be a mistake.

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