



Great Lakes water only reasonable option for Waukesha

By Mayor Shawn Reilly

The Great Lakes will not be harmed by Waukesha's proposal to switch from groundwater to Lake Michigan water to provide a needed, sustainable supply of drinking water.

By making the switch, Waukesha will provide environmental benefits — preserving valuable wetlands and surface water resources, and ending its contribution to the significant depletion of groundwater in our region.

To do this, we would withdraw one one-millionth of 1 percent of Great Lakes water. And then return the same amount back to the lakes, after use and advanced treatment. So there is no harm to the Great Lakes.

Water for Waukesha will not set a precedent for harmful diversions of water to California or other states. The question of where to draw the line on use of Great Lakes water was settled with the adoption of the Great Lakes Compact — an agreement among states that was enacted into federal law — in 2008. Water is prohibited from being pumped to areas beyond the surface divide of the Great Lakes. Water to California or even to Jefferson County is illegal.

The Compact does, however, allow water to be pumped to communities in counties that straddle the Great Lakes Basin. Waukesha is in a straddling county, so it can apply for Great Lakes water, but only if it returns the water to the lake after use and treatment.

The other primary requirement of the Compact is that we must have "no reasonable water supply alternative." Groups that oppose water for Waukesha claim that the Compact says lake water must be a "last resort." But that is not what the Compact says. There is a big difference between no reasonable alternatives and no alternatives at all.

The Department of Natural Resources is currently taking public comments on its draft report that says Waukesha "has no reasonable water supply alternative ... even considering conserving existing water supplies." That conclusion comes after five years of analyzing our 3,000-page application and examining the various water supply alternatives.

The Department of Natural Resources said that forecasts of Waukesha's water use, including extensive conservation, are reasonable. But it also looked at what the environmental impacts would be if Waukesha used far less than the forecasts — as opponents have proposed. The DNR said that groundwater alternatives would still damage 700 to 2,300 acres of wetlands, as well as streams, lakes and aquifers, even if Waukesha were to use much less water than forecast. Those environmental impacts are unreasonable, the DNR said.

Our opponents, however, make the unbelievable claim that our use of groundwater "means there is no environmental impact to surrounding wetlands, surface waters or the deep groundwater aquifer," in direct contradiction to modeling by the DNR and by others. For our opponents, denying access to Lake Michigan — even though the Compact that they supported specifically allows it — is more important than protecting the local environment or providing healthy and sustainable water for our families.

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Our primary water supply has been drawn down hundreds of feet — so severe that the Legislature designated it as one of two Groundwater Management Areas in the state. Part of the problem is due to a layer of shale rock in the area that restricts the amount of precipitation that soaks through the ground into the groundwater. The other problem is that the demand on the aquifer is high, due to the dense population in southeastern Wisconsin and northeastern Illinois. Even Milwaukee was a major user of the aquifer until the 1950s, when it switched to the lake.

The drawdown has also caused an increase in naturally occurring contaminants in the water, including concentrations of radium, a carcinogen, that exceeds federal drinking water standards. Waukesha is under a court order to provide a water supply that meets radium standards.

Continued use by Waukesha of this drawn-down aquifer would cause unreasonable environmental impacts and is environmentally unsustainable, which is why we are applying touse and recycle Lake Michigan water.

A 28-page memo by our opponents proposes that we remain on groundwater, but their proposal is critically flawed. It fails to meet drinking water standards for radium. It also fails to provide even the artificially low amounts of water they say we should live with. It fails to recognize the costs or environmental impacts of replacing wells — some of which are 80 years old. It also relies on a treatment technology it claims is common in Wisconsin, but is, in fact, rare and may create a waste disposal problem that alone would cost more than \$200 million. It is an incomplete and unsound approach that would eventually need to be replaced by a longterm sustainable solution. As I continually stated during my campaign for mayor, our ratepayers cannot afford to pay hundreds of millions of dollars twice.

The Great Lakes Compact would not have been adopted by Wisconsin if it did not include provisions to solve the well-known problems in Waukesha. Sen. Mark Miller, D-Monona, who chaired the Senate committee that authored the Compact bill, said in 2008, "The city of Waukesha has a serious public health concern with radium levels in their drinking water. Waukesha's situation is a primary consideration. During negotiation of the compact, Wisconsin fought long and hard for an exception that would allow Waukesha to apply for Great Lakes water. It is even called the 'Waukesha exception.'" And George Meyer, executive director of the Wisconsin Wildlife Federation, testified in 2008 that Waukesha knows "that the Compact improves their opportunity to obtain water from Lake Michigan. ... Approve this historic bill. Help ... Waukesha ... and most importantly, protect the Great Lakes for our children and grandchildren and beyond."

Our city helped pass the Compact, to protect the Great Lakes and to meet our own water supply needs. We are not a threat to the Compact or to the Great Lakes. Our application is an opportunity to show that the spirit of trust and cooperation that led to the Compact can be relied on as we face other regional challenges in the future.

(Shawn Reilly is mayor of Waukesha.)

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