

The science is winning

Waukesha water application advances

It's a battle of science versus regional politics, and thankfully, science is winning. The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources announced Tuesday that in the next 30 to 60 days they will be forwarding the city of Waukesha's application for a diversion of Great Lakes water to the governors of the Great Lakes states.

The governors must unanimously approve Waukesha's application in order for Waukesha's application to be successful. If it is successful, a pipeline will be built to Oak Creek, where they will supply Waukesha with water. The wastewater will be treated and returned to Lake Michigan via the Root River. This diversion cycle will have absolutely no effect on Lake Michigan's water levels and actually have a beneficial effect on the return river.

It's a win for the city of Oak Creek, too, because they will be able to use their excess capacity to sell water to Waukesha, lowering rates for Oak Creek's water customers. The city of Milwaukee could have benefitted in the same way (the pipeline would have been shorter, lowering costs) but foolishly decided to take themselves out as a potential water supplier. So much for regional cooperation, and their water customers are the ones being punished for Milwaukee's shortsightedness.

The need for an alternative source of water was thrust upon the city by the Environmental Protection Agency, who declared that the radium levels in our drinking water were too high. After a lengthy court battle, the city needed to dilute the water it was taking from the deep aquifer that runs east from Jefferson County. The city has been relying on wells in a more shallow aquifer, but long-term use will affect the surface water features such as Poplar Creek and the Vernon Marsh.

After carefully considering all the alternatives, and sometimes contentious debates with former Mayor Jeff Scrima, the only feasible long-term source of water for the city is Lake Michigan. Coincidentally, the decision to forward the application to the Great Lakes governors comes days after a report saying the water level in the deep aquifer will drop 200 feet over the next 50 years, which would mean even more contaminants in the drinking water.

The process won't be easy. The governors of other states will be under pressure from some environmental groups during the process to reject the diversion just as they organized a hypocritical campaign here to try to discredit Waukesha's application. We can expect during the public hearings to hear more about the diversion being "precedent-setting" and there will be complaints about "urban sprawl." Of course, both complaints are ridiculous.

The city of Waukesha and the city of Milwaukee are roughly the same age. Perhaps Milwaukee environmentalists should start an independence movement for the Town of Granville if they're so concerned about sprawl. They should stop pretending that the **Waukesha Water Utility** service area, created by SEWRPC, is some sort of nefarious plot to dethrone Milwaukee as the region's urban center.

Meanwhile, Waukesha's application will not set a precedent of permanently shipping water beyond the Great Lakes Basin because the 1/1,000,000th of 1 percent of the Great Lakes that will be withdrawn will be 100% returned. Furthermore, the provision in the Great Lakes Compact allowing Waukesha to apply for the diversion was created with the full knowledge that the city of Waukesha would apply.

Former DNR Secretary and Wisconsin Wildlife Federation Executive Director George Meyer said when testifying in support of the Great Lakes Compact, "It is no accident that the Mayors of Waukesha and New Berlin, the two communities who have expressed interest the most immediate interest in Great Lakes water, are supporting the Compact. They know that the Compact improves their opportunity to obtain water from Lake Michigan."

That's because the governors are required under the great Lakes Compact to show due cause for denying Waukesha's application. Meyer's group and others may be opposed to Waukesha's application now, but the governors are bound by the facts of the situation and not the hysterical, uninformed appeals of various environmental groups.

Waukesha's application is advancing because it is the science that is persuasive. If the spirit and the letter of the Great Lakes Compact is followed, we should expect the Great Lakes governors to approve Waukesha's application.

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