

SPEAKING OUT ON WATER

Scores of residents, politicians voice opinions at public hearing on Waukesha's water plan

By Matt Masterson

Freeman Staff

WAUKESHA — Larry Nelson said he had only been waiting 16 years for what he called a “red letter day” in the history of both the city of Waukesha and the Great Lakes Compact.

The former mayor and current county supervisor was among scores of concerned officials, politicians and residents who attended a public hearing at Carroll University's Shattuck Music Center to voice their opinions about the city's application to divert Lake Michigan water.

Nelson said by the time he became Waukesha's mayor in 2006, the city had already looked into any way possible to find a clean, reliable water source to replace the radium-contaminated groundwater.

“Believe me, if we could do it cheaper, without the pipeline, without Great Lakes water, we would have been happy to do it,” Nelson said. “But that's not the case.”

The hearing was part of the review process by the Great Lakes Regional Body and Compact Council — which are comprised of representatives from the eight Great Lakes states and two Canadian provinces.

The city is looking to divert up to an annual average of 10.1 million gallons of Lake Michigan water per day for its water supply service area as it must find and implement a sustainable, radium-compliant water source by a court-ordered June 2018 deadline.

Joining Nelson were current Waukesha Mayor Shawn Reilly, County Executive Paul Farrow, County Board Chair Paul Decker and more than a half-dozen members of the city's Common Council who also spoke in favor of the application.

“It's hard to imagine a water supply decision that has received more investigation than Waukesha's,” Reilly said during the hearing, referencing the Department of Natural Resources' five-year review of the city's 3,000-page application.

While local officials largely backed the proposal, others from around southeastern Wisconsin questioned Waukesha's service area, its actual need for water and other alternatives which could be pursued.

“I believe very strongly in the Great Lakes Compact,” Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett said, “and I also believe that economic growth and environmental sustainability are not enemies, that they can go hand-in-hand.”

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Waukesha Mayor Shawn Reilly testifies in favor of the Waukesha water application as Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett waits to testify against the application during a public hearing on Thursday at Carroll University.

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He expressed concerns over the city's expanded service area, which includes portions of surrounding communities, pointing to what he called a "clear difference" between state and federal law on the matter he believes is a major flaw in the application.

Racine Mayor John Dickert also opposed the proposal, saying that should the Compact Council "crack the egg" and allow Waukesha to receive Lake Michigan water, it will set a negative precedent for future applications.

"If there's one thing I know for sure, water is going to be our new gold," he said, "therefore our protection of it is imperative."

The city seeks to take advantage of a "straddling community" exemption, which would allow it to borrow and return one one-millionth of 1 percent of Great Lakes water under the compact.

The Compact prohibits water from being pumped beyond counties that straddle the Great Lakes Basin surface divide. But it allows communities in such areas to use Great Lakes water if they have "no reasonable water supply alternative" and return treated water.

The Regional Body and Compact Council held a Q& A with representatives from each of the Great Lakes states and provinces Wednesday, as well as an informational session prior to Thursday's public hearing.

The governors of the eight Great Lakes states must unanimously approve the city's application for it to be accepted.

Public comments may still be submitted to the council until March 14 and a decision from the council is expected sometime this spring.

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From left, Waukesha County Board Chairman Paul Decker, Waukesha County Executive Paul Farrow, Waukesha Alderman Steve Johnson, Waukesha Alderman Joe Pieper, Ginger Kollmansberger (representing Wisconsin U.S. Senator Ron Johnson) and Waukesha Water Commissioner Paul Ybarra wait to testify at a public hearing on Waukesha's application for Lake Michigan water on Thursday at Carroll University.

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