

WAUKESHA WATER DEBATE

Lake Michigan our only reasonable water supply

By Shawn Reilly

Representatives of the Great Lakes states and provinces will be in Waukesha this week to learn firsthand about our proposal to borrow and return Lake Michigan water. We are grateful for their time and their commitment to a review that is based on facts and science.

No decisions are more important to our health and future than those about our drinking water. Decisions must be based on detailed analysis and longterm planning. But it is hard to imagine a drinking water decision that has had more discussion and scrutiny than ours.

Waukesha studied our water issues for more than a decade, examining 14 potential water supplies, including six in great detail. More than 100 public meetings have been held. A 32member panel of experts at the Southeastern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission also studied the issue for more than five years.

Finally, after a five-year review of our 3,000-page application and [22](#) subsequent memos, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources concluded that our only reasonable water supply alternative is to borrow and return Lake Michigan water.

The solution will come at a cost. Water rates are projected to double at a minimum and possibly triple. However, there is significant cost to any possible solution. In fact, the DNR has said cost is not a factor in its decision because all the alternatives are considered equal in cost. Therefore, we must consider what is the most environmentally sustainable and protective of public health. That is Great Lakes water with return flow.

We need a new water supply because our groundwater supply is severely depleted and is projected to drop another 200 feet in the next 50 years. Naturally occurring contaminants are increasing. And we are under a court order to comply with the federal drinking water standards for radium, a carcinogen. Our water conservation efforts cannot prevent our need for a new supply.

Our application is being made under the Great Lakes Compact, an agreement among states that our city helped enact. It allows Great Lakes water for communities in need in counties that straddle the Great Lakes basin, if the water is returned after use and treatment, and if the Great Lakes governors approve.

In our case, we will borrow 1/1,000,000 of 1 percent of Great Lakes water and **return the same amount**. We will not harm lake levels.

However, a group calling itself the Compact Implementation Coalition is opposing our application with a campaign of misleading information that is being repeated by others.

One of CIC's false claims is that Waukesha could continue to use our current wells if we treat the water and serve a smaller service area than state law requires. They ignore the

fact that the deep aquifer is severely depleted and is not a reliable long-term water supply.

The DNR reviewed the CIC's proposal and found it flawed. Among the errors are the CIC's inflated capacities of our existing wells and its failure to consider that its proposed reverse osmosis treatment wastes 10 percent to 20 percent of the water, requiring more groundwater pumping. That means additional shallow aquifer wells would be necessary, harming 900 to 1,000 acres of wetlands. The DNR concluded that is unreasonable.

The CIC also did not consider that water quality in the shallow aquifer is vulnerable to contamination. Waukesha recently had to suspend the use of two of our shallow wells because chloride levels exceeded secondary standards, potentially allowing corrosive water to enter our drinking water system.

Another false CIC claim is that Waukesha's application promotes growth. In fact, regional planners estimate our service area will only have 0.5 percent annual population growth until build-out in about 2050. Only 15 percent of the service area is available for future development. The CIC proposes that service not be provided to portions of communities adjacent to the city. But the city is already serving areas outside of its limits because of existing public health issues.

The CIC's newest claim condemns "Waukesha's return of partially treated wastewater through the Root River" to Lake Michigan, even though that cannot happen. In fact, the treatment facility has been designed so that only water that has received advanced treatment can reach the start of the 20-mile pipe to the Root River and Lake Michigan.

We are returning water via the Root River at the suggestion of DNR water management staff. The additional flow will improve fish passage and help a DNR fish egg collection facility, improving angling opportunities for the river and the Great Lakes. Our return flow water to the Root River is cleaner than the river.

The CIC also claims that borrowing water under the Great Lakes Compact must be our "last resort." Again, this is untrue. The Compact states a community must have "no **reasonable** water supply alternative." The Wisconsin DNR found that Waukesha meets this standard.

Finally, the CIC promotes fears that approval of Waukesha's request will send Great Lakes water to distant places. The Compact prohibits water from going beyond communities in counties that straddle the Great Lakes surface divide, like Waukesha. Approval of Waukesha's application will not change that fact. In fact, the years of study and analysis of our application sets a high standard for any future requests in straddling counties.

(Shawn Reilly is mayor of Waukesha.)