

Thursday, May 13, 2010

For more information, contact

Bill McClenahan

414.405.1051

bill@martinschreiber.com

Waukesha water will not add to flooding concerns

Return flow will improve, not harm, Underwood Creek

Waukesha's proposed return of water to Lake Michigan will improve, not harm, Underwood Creek and will not add to flooding concerns, according to Ald. Paul Ybarra, the President of the City's Common Council.

"We recognize that communities along Underwood Creek have experienced flooding and that any additional water seems like too much. I want to assure residents and communities along Underwood Creek that returning the water we use would not increase the risks of flooding," Ybarra said. "During heavy rain or snowmelt events along Underwood Creek, we would temporarily pause the discharge of water to Underwood Creek. We would not cause any increased risk of flooding."

The Council President said even if the city's plan had not included plans to temporarily pause the return flow, water from Waukesha would increase the flow of Underwood Creek by 2% or less during a two-year creek flow (flows caused by heavy rains or snow melt) and by less than 1% during a 100-year flow. "We heard the concerns that residents may have, so we are proposing to pause the flow to the creek during events that threaten flooding," he said.

Ybarra said cutting off the flow temporarily will not prevent Waukesha from achieving its goal of returning 100% of the volume of water taken from Lake Michigan back to the lake. "The temporary pause in flow is something that would occur infrequently and we can make that volume up by having small increases in return flow on other days, without any adverse impact to the creek or to Lake Michigan," he said.

The alderman also commented on concerns regarding water quality in the creek, saying, "The fact that the public has questions about water quality is also understandable, but the fact is that the water from Waukesha would actually improve the creek's ecosystem." Ybarra referred to modeling results that were independently reviewed that show that Waukesha's return flow would reduce bacteria concentrations in Underwood Creek, which is a local water quality concern. Waukesha has said it will disinfect the return flow water year-round.

Development around Underwood Creek has reduced the natural recharge of the creek and the creek flow at times goes to zero. Water studies show that the return flow water would create a baseflow during dry periods, allowing for the development of better fish habitat. As an example, Ybarra noted that the Lower Rouge River in Michigan has seen an improved fishery, in part due to the use of treated wastewater as a resource. Waukesha is proposing to provide a similar environmental benefit to Underwood Creek – a benefit that would be lost if it piped the return flow water all the way back to Lake Michigan.

“Piping the water directly to the lake instead of using it as an environmental resource is less sensible,” he said. “Building a pipe under the existing infrastructure in Milwaukee would eliminate the environmental benefit to the creek and also be disruptive for Milwaukee residents and businesses.”

He noted that the city’s application for Great Lakes water, along with its appendices, is approximately 2,000 pages. “The impacts of all the alternatives have been extensively studied by experts,” he said.

Ybarra noted that Waukesha’s request is similar to the discharge systems in most municipalities in the state. Most utilities discharge into streams or rivers. “State regulations for communities that discharge to rivers and streams are more stringent than those for communities that send water directly to Lake Michigan. Waukesha’s treatment of wastewater will meet or surpass state regulations. And Waukesha does not have combined sewers that add storm water to its sewer system. No untreated water will be returned to Underwood Creek.”

He added that Waukesha is downstream from other communities that discharge to the Fox River. “It’s not unusual to be downstream from another community. It has been no problem,” he said.

Ybarra said the City of Waukesha is seeking a Lake Michigan water source because continued use of the city’s current deep aquifer water supply is unsustainable. “Recharge of the aquifer is limited due to a layer of shale in the area and it’s dropping five to nine feet per year. The drawdown is also having negative impacts on surface waters in the area. In addition, water quality issues in the deep aquifer, including radium, are increasing. By switching to Lake Michigan, we can protect public health, recycle the water back to the source, and help local groundwater resources recover,” he said.

The alderman said the city is proud of its leadership in water conservation. “We were the first community in the state to ban daytime sprinkling, the first in the state to enact rates that encourage water conservation and the first to adopt rebates for remodeling with water efficient toilets,” he said. “Those kinds of efforts, along with public education, helped us reduce water use by 11% in just three years. But conservation alone cannot solve our water problems. We must find a new water supply.”

###