

As Waukesha water chief, Duchniak thinks communications should be clear as a stream



Dan Duchniak

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Waukesha's \$286 million water project is in the starting gate and ready to run, giving Dan Duchniak a moment to look back and consider the lessons of John Bennett.

Bennett was Duchniak's boss when he was an engineering intern for the city of Franklin from 1988 to 1990. Duchniak said he learned a lot then about drafting, surveying and storm-water work.

But the biggest lesson he got from Bennett, Duchniak said, was about the importance of clearly communicating with people. For an engineer, that often means removing jargon from presentations and speaking plainly.

"A lot of times as an engineer, you think people understand what you understand," said Duchniak, now general manager of the Waukesha Water Utility.

They don't. That lesson began exerting an influence on the way Duchniak responded to Waukesha's water-quality troubles from the moment he took the job in 2003.

Negotiations, compromise and communication were at the heart of his work on the project. His responsibilities had him working with the state Legislature on the Great Lakes Compact, discussing project possibilities with surrounding communities, ironing out a final contract to buy water from the city of Milwaukee and convincing Great Lakes states that a "yes" vote on Waukesha's project was a good choice.

Working with other states, Duchniak said, really brought Bennett's lessons to the forefront. To explain the project's benefits, he and the Waukesha mayor embarked on a road trip to every Great Lake state.

"If I'm going to be asking for approval from these states," Duchniak said, "we should be visiting these states so they know who we are."

Still, it wasn't the first time in his career just how indispensable clear communication is. When Duchniak graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in 1990 with a degree in civil engineering, he took a job in the Racine Public Works Department.

In that role, he oversaw a lot of road reconstruction, downtown redevelopment and work on the city's riverwalk.

The projects were good for the city, he said, but he moved on after a year. "I found out I really didn't like transportation and roadwork," he said.

He switched to the Racine Water and Wastewater Utility and immediately got a close view of the work he would be doing. The first project involved improvements to the treatment plant's grit room, which is the first stop at the utility for raw sewage.

"I walked in there initially," Duchniak said, "and it was like, 'Oh, boy, what did I get myself into.'"

But, he said, he quickly found he loved the job and continued working on distribution systems and other projects there until a utility-engineer position opened up in Oak Creek in 1993.

He took it and stayed there until 2003, working on, among other things, an intake project on Lake Michigan and an expansion of the city's water-treatment plant. Oak Creek also won a water-quality competition, and he helped turn that into a partnership with Black Bear Soda allowing the city's water to be bottled and sold under the name Claire Baie.

That public-private partnership generated about \$100,000 a year for the city. His work to win approval for it, he said, drew on the basics he learned from Bennett.

"I was communicating with the public in ways they would understand," Duchniak said.

In 2002, a friend who's a labor attorney suggested he try for the general-manager job at the Waukesha Water Utility. He said he wasn't interested, and was even late for the interview, only doing it as a favor.

His lack of interest faded, though, quickly after he learned about the city's struggles with water quality.

"It came across to me," Duchniak, 51, said, "as this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to try and solve this water-quality issue for the public."

Nearly 15 years later, in December 2017, Waukesha signed an agreement to buy water from Milwaukee and send it back to Lake Michigan through the Root River in Franklin. Right now, the project is in the engineering phase and nearing the permitting phase.

The construction portion, Duchniak said, could go out to bid in late 2019 or early 2020.

The water project, which will use federal money and be done in compliance with the federal Davis-Bacon law, will be complete by 2023, he said.

What has been the biggest lesson from his with other states and his efforts to find common ground with Milwaukee?

Simply that the important of straightforward communication can't be overemphasized, he said.

"In politics, we've lost the art of compromise," Duchniak said. "We showed through this negotiation that compromise can be reached."

The Daily Reporter: What surprises you most about your job?

Duchniak: The evolution of the public caring about water. When I started in this industry, people were just concerned about having water come out of their faucet when they turned it on. That changed with the cryptosporidium outbreaks around the world and here in southeastern Wisconsin. I believe that really opened the eyes of the public to the point where there really is a concern about the resource, how it is obtained and how we use it. We are in such a water-rich area in southeastern Wisconsin, yet we face many of the water issues that other utilities are dealing with throughout the country and the world.

TDR: Which living person do you most admire?

Duchniak: I think people expect to hear a great leader or someone who was very successful in business, but I would have to say my parents. My dad moved here from Germany when he was very young, and my mother lost her mother when she was very young. So they both grew up with challenges in their lives. They married after high school and had four children. My dad worked first shift at Rexnord and also worked part time for the Milwaukee Journal on weekends. My mom worked second shift at St. Luke's hospital so that she was home in the mornings when us kids went to school.

TDR: What other job(s) did you consider trying?

Duchniak: I thought about going into computer science or electrical engineering, but I found that civil engineering was more interesting to me. I liked being able to see what I was designing and building.

TDR: What is your greatest fear?

Duchniak: Failing people. I am motivated by the large issues facing the industry. In my current position in Waukesha, we were facing a water supply that was depleted and was contaminated by naturally occurring radium. The challenge was to resolve those issues for the long term.

TDR: What is your greatest extravagance?

Duchniak: Golf. I love to golf. I have been going on a golf trip with friends for more than 20 years. Once per year, I go on a trip out of state and play some really nice courses with this group.

TDR: What would you never wear?

Duchniak: Speedo. For obvious reasons. Most importantly, I don't have the body for it.

TDR: If you could change one thing about yourself, what would it be?

Duchniak: Besides wanting the body of an elite athlete and having the looks of Brad Pitt, I would have to say that I would love to eliminate the allergies I deal with throughout the year. Whether spring or fall, it always feels like I am dealing with something.

TDR: What would your colleagues be surprised to find out about you?

Duchniak: I am a huge family person. Whether it was coaching my sons in basketball or baseball, or watching them play soccer or volleyball, or watching the play they were in, or any other event they participated in, I can probably count on one hand the number of games I have missed over the years.