

For opponents of Waukesha, politics trumps environmental protection

By Dan Duchniak

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For years, opponents of Waukesha's application to use and recycle Great Lakes water have issued a series of misleading press releases and opinion pieces. They are usually intended to leave the impression that the project would somehow threaten the Great Lakes.

But lost in all the noise from a Milwaukee-based coalition of opponents is the basic truth: that the Waukesha proposal returns about the same amount it withdraws and will not harm the Great Lakes. In fact, it will provide the benefits of improving a river connected to the Great Lakes (the Root River) and enhancing production at a state fish egg collection facility located on the river. Most importantly, it will prove that the Great Lakes Compact will work by basing decisions on science — and not politics — resolving the issue that jeopardized previous Great Lakes protection laws.

Due to geological conditions that restrict rain and snow melt from soaking deeply into the earth to recharge groundwater supply, along with over-pumping of the deep groundwater by southeastern Wisconsin and northeastern Illinois communities, Waukesha needs a new water supply. But every alternative to a Lake Michigan supply would cause unreasonable harm to area wetlands, streams, lakes and groundwater, according to the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. More on that in a minute.

It seems obvious that Waukesha — like every Wisconsin community — needs a healthy, reliable source of drinking water for the families and businesses in its supply area. But it is clear that, for many of Waukesha's opponents, denying water is seen as a way to harm their neighbors to gain an economic advantage. The idea of regional cooperation is rejected. As one local area mayor put it, "Water is gold. Why would I give the opportunity to an outside community?"

Some opponents also say water must be kept in the Great Lakes Basin, and that Waukesha is outside of the basin. If Waukesha gets water, where will it stop, they ask?

That question was asked and answered when the Great Lakes Compact, an agreement among states and provinces, was adopted as federal law in 2008. The compact says water can never be pumped beyond the border of counties that straddle the Great Lakes Basin, like Waukesha County. Not to California. Not even to Jefferson County, just west of Waukesha.

Even in straddling counties, the compact requires that there be no reasonable alternative to Great Lakes water, that the water must be recycled back to the lake, and that the proposal to use water from Lake Michigan must get the approval of all eight Great Lakes governors.

Waukesha would withdraw one one-millionth of 1% of the water from the Great Lakes, and then

recycle the same volume back to the lake after use and treatment. The return flow water — which is cleaner than the river — would be added to the Root River to improve the water quality and fish habitat and flow back to Lake Michigan.

Years of study by several different groups of experts have concluded that the only reasonable water source for Waukesha is Lake Michigan, meeting the need requirement of the compact.

For instance, the Southeastern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission (SEWRPC) put together a 32-member panel of experts to review the plan for the water supply needs of the region. After a five-year study, the conclusion was unanimous by the expert panel that Lake Michigan water was the only reasonable alternative.

Waukesha itself also extensively studied various alternatives for more than a decade and came to the same conclusion. Its application to the DNR includes thousands of pages of scientific information, studies and analysis.

And, in June, the DNR, after an extensive five-year review and analysis of Waukesha's application, released its own draft reports, concluding that every alternative to Lake Michigan water was unreasonable due to the impacts on wetlands, lakes, streams and aquifers.

The Milwaukee-based group of opponents of Waukesha released a statement rejecting the DNR's findings the same morning the reports were released, before they could have even been read. They followed that up two weeks later by releasing an inadequately developed, 28-page report that rejected the conclusion that the DNR, the city and the regional planning commission expert panel all independently had come to. No details or underlying assumptions were provided by the opponents, in contrast to the extensive detail and state-of-the-art groundwater modeling contained in each of the other peer reviewed studies.

The opponents' proposal was one the DNR had just rejected — that Waukesha could continue to avoid the use of Lake Michigan water by refusing to follow state planning laws, ignoring groundwater management laws and reducing the size of the water supply service area established by regional planners. Waukesha could then reduce the amount of water it would need, they said. They concluded with a claim that is simply without credibility: that continued use of the groundwater would result in "no additional drawdown" of groundwater aquifers and have "no additional impact to wetlands."

The DNR had already examined this idea.

Contrary to the report the opponents put out, the DNR said the environmental impacts would be unreasonable. Even with a reduced water demand, the DNR found that groundwater use would cause damage to 700 to 2,300 acres of wetlands, along with damage to streams, lakes and groundwater resources. Modeling by Waukesha at higher withdrawal levels of use showed even greater impacts.

The groundwater in Waukesha is severely depleted, due to the layer of shale that restricts recharge from rain and snow and its location in the densely populated region of southeastern

Wisconsin and northeastern Illinois that draws on the aquifer. The opponents' claim that groundwater can be withdrawn, used, treated and sent down the Fox River to the Gulf of Mexico without any environmental consequences is without merit.

The opponents also claimed their water supply proposal would save Waukesha money, but it will actually cost much more in the long run when their unsustainable alternative needs to be replaced with a sustainable one.

The opponents have failed to convince regional planners, Waukesha or the DNR of their environmental position, cost claims and legal arguments. Hiring a consultant to repeat their claims is not news, it is just more of the same. Their position should be dismissed for what it is: a misguided campaign to create a political controversy when the scientific conclusion is clear. The only sustainable water supply for Waukesha is Lake Michigan, and recycling the water back to the lake ensures no harm to the Great Lakes.

For more information, please see www.waukesha-water.com.

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