

Deep divide on Waukesha plan on display for Great Lakes reps



Waukesha alderman Joan Francoeur argues in favor of a plan to tap Lake Michigan water for the city of Waukesha during a public hearing on Waukesha's request.

By Don Behm of the Journal Sentinel
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Photos



Supporters, opponents weigh in on Waukesha water plan

Waukesha — Supporters and opponents of Waukesha's request for a Lake Michigan water supply took one last shot Thursday at influencing officials from Great Lakes states who will approve or deny the unprecedented plan.

The public hearing at Carroll University drew a crowd of more than 200 people, and half of them either praised or panned the proposal. Supporters lauded it for tapping lake water to protect public health, allowing Waukesha to shut down deep wells drawing radium-contaminated water. Critics said the plan cloaked a desire for suburban growth under the guise of drinking water necessity.

Local and regional environmental groups complained the city could meet reasonable water needs by continuing to remove radium and other contaminants from water drawn from the deep wells even as city and State of Wisconsin officials said the deep sandstone aquifer supplying the radium-tainted water was depleted and continued withdrawals were not sustainable.

A Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce official voiced support for Waukesha's request, which he described as "a use, recycle, and return plan that will result in a zero-loss impact on the Great Lakes."

"The Waukesha water diversion request before you addresses a serious public health threat in a way that does not threaten Great Lakes water levels or water quality and that does not deplete our deep or shallow groundwater aquifers," said Steve Baas, senior vice president for public policy with the association. "The request strengthens our regional economy."

Ten officials from Great Lakes states and provinces heard testimony of local and state elected officials with differing opinions on the plan.

In a statement, U.S. Sen. Ron Johnson (R-Wis.) urged representatives of the states to approve the city's request. Brookfield Mayor Steve Ponto said he supported the plan.

Racine Mayor John Dickert said the city is opposed to Waukesha's proposed discharge of treated wastewater to the Root River. The river empties into Lake Michigan at Racine's lakefront.

"We do not want what will come downstream," Dickert said of contaminants that would remain in treated wastewater.

Karen Hobbs, deputy policy director for the Natural Resources Defense Council's Midwest office in Chicago, criticized Waukesha for not doing enough to conserve water.

Waukesha's conservation goal of reducing demand by 1 million gallons a day by 2050 "represents roughly one-quarter of one percent in additional annual water savings each year," Hobbs said in prepared remarks.

The city's conservation effort "is too reliant on voluntary and educational measures" and projected savings fail to incorporate local and national declining water use trends, Hobbs says.

At a briefing Wednesday for officials of Great Lakes states and provinces, Waukesha Water Utility General Manager Dan Duchniak said that about half of the city's planned 1 million-gallons-a-day savings would come from water-efficient appliances and fixtures. Another half would come from other strategies, such as a daytime sprinkling ban and customer rates set to encourage conservation.

Thursday's public hearing was the only one scheduled by the [Conference of Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Governors and Premiers](#) as part of its regional review of the city's request to divert up to an average of 10.1 million gallons a day of water out of the lake's basin by 2050. A withdrawal is expected to start out at less than an average of 7 million gallons a day and gradually increase.

An equal volume of water would be returned to the lake as fully treated wastewater, to comply with terms of a 2008 federal law known as the Great Lakes protection compact.

The compact prohibits Great Lakes water from being pumped beyond counties straddling the drainage basin under any circumstances. The city is 1.5 miles west of the basin divide, but it is in a straddling county so it can ask for lake water to solve public health or environmental problems.

Waukesha is the first community in the U.S. located entirely outside the Great Lakes basin to ask for a diversion of water under the compact.

Although the Milwaukee Riverkeeper and other environmental [groups opposed to the city's plan](#) say that the compact requires that a diversion and return beyond the divide can only be approved as a "last resort," there is no such language in the law. The compact does require that lake water be the only reasonable option.

The [Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources](#) said in December that Waukesha's request met all compact requirements and could be adopted by the other Great Lakes states. The compact requires unanimous consent of the eight states.

After more than five years of studying alternatives, the state [DNR concluded](#) the city did not have a reasonable water supply option available to it west of the divide. Specifically, each alternative west of the divide would have adverse effects on wetlands, streams and inland lakes, according to the DNR. And no other option was as environmentally sustainable as a lake supply.

The [states and provinces](#) will send representatives to an April 21 meeting in Chicago to discuss their views of the plan. Then officials from the eight states will meet face-to-face at least 30 days later in Chicago to make a decision.

If the eight Great Lakes states approve the request, Waukesha would halt use of 10 wells. Seven deep wells draw radium-contaminated water from a depleted sandstone aquifer. Those deep wells provided 85% of the water distributed in the city in 2014.

Concentrations of radium and salts in water from the deep wells are increasing as water levels in the sandstone drop lower, officials said. The city is under a court-ordered deadline of June 2018 to fully comply with federal drinking water standards for radium.

A provision in Waukesha's plan to extend water service to a limited zone outside of its city limits was targeted by opponents speaking at Thursday's public hearing inside the Shattuck Music Center on the university campus. Local and regional environmental groups have said the city's lake water request would not be necessary if Waukesha did not provide water to portions of the towns of Waukesha, Genesee and Delafield and the City of Pewaukee.

Wisconsin's compact implementation law requires a community seeking a diversion to establish a water service supply area that is consistent with its regional sewer service area. A sewer service area plan from the 1990s included pieces of the towns of Waukesha and Delafield and City of Pewaukee.

When the Southeastern Regional Planning Commission established Waukesha's water service area in 2008, it also included a chunk in the Town of Genesee where groundwater is contaminated with disease-causing bacteria. This was done at the DNR's request because failing septic systems have contaminated a shallow aquifer used by private wells there.

Wisconsin Wildlife Federation Executive Director George Meyer criticized the city's service area as "a tremendous expansion" and one that "goes beyond what is necessary to meet Waukesha's needs to provide safe drinking water to its citizens and provide reasonable growth for its community."

In testimony at the hearing, Duchniak said a lake water supply purchased from Oak Creek would not be used to spur unchecked growth and suburban sprawl.

"Seventy percent of Waukesha's service is already developed," Duchniak said. "Another 15% is protected as environmental corridors and just 15% ... is available for future development."

Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett restated his willingness to sell water to the city, if Waukesha would remove the broader service area from its request.

In response to questions Wednesday from representatives of other Great Lakes states and the provinces, DNR deputy administrator for environmental management Eric Ebersberger said the state could place conditions on extending water service beyond Waukesha as part of final approval of the city's request.

Waukesha's water request

■ Public comments accepted through **March 14**.

■ **Written comments** on Waukesha's request for a Lake Michigan water supply can be sent by email to: comments@waukeshadiversion.org.

■ **Mail comments** to: Conference of Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Governors and Premiers, 20 N. Wacker Drive, Suite 2700, Chicago, IL 60606.

■ For **information** on the request, go to the conference website: waukeshadiversion.org.

About Don Behm



Don Behm reports on Milwaukee County government, Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District, the environment and communities in southeastern Wisconsin. He has won reporting awards for investigations of Great Lakes water pollution, Milwaukee's cryptosporidiosis outbreak, and the deaths of three sewer construction workers in a Menomonee Valley methane explosion.

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