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Let Waukesha quench its thirst

By Andrew Weiland

The City of Waukesha's five-year quest to tap Lake Michigan to solve its water quality problems is finally moving forward. The application phase is over and the approval phase began earlier this summer. The public comment period is nearing its conclusion.

First and foremost, this is an important public health issue. In the 1800s, tourists flocked to Waukesha to drink its pristine water. But now, Waukesha's water supply has unacceptably high levels of radium, which increases the risk of cancer. Most of the city's water comes from the deep aquifer, which has been drawn down by Waukesha and other communities in the region.

This is also an important economic issue for southeastern Wisconsin. With a population of more than 70,000, Waukesha is the largest city in Waukesha County, the fourth largest in the region and the seventh largest in the state. Waukesha is a major economic driver in southeastern Wisconsin and is home to numerous businesses.

Waukesha needs clean water for the sake of those residents and businesses. The city is under a court order to find a solution to its water problems. After years of study, Waukesha officials determined that Lake Michigan was its best option.

Under the Great Lakes Compact, which was adopted in 2008, Waukesha needs all of the Great Lakes states to approve its request for Lake Michigan water. It must show that Lake Michigan is the only solution to its water problems, and it must return treated wastewater to the lake. That is a high bar to clear. But that's appropriate considering how important it is to protect the Great Lakes as a natural resource.

Some of the harshest critics of Waukesha's Lake Michigan water application are people in Milwaukee that see the issue as another example of damage done from urban sprawl. They feel that suburban growth has come at Milwaukee's expense. Milwaukeeans are understandably frustrated that their city shoulders most of the burden for dealing with poverty in the region and want suburban communities to do more to provide affordable housing options and mass transit.

When City of Waukesha officials sought a source for Lake Michigan water, City of Milwaukee officials objected to Waukesha's plans to seek water for anticipated growth areas beyond its boundaries.

So instead, Waukesha reached a deal with Oak Creek to provide it with Lake Michigan water. It was a savvy move by Oak Creek, which would gain \$4 million to \$5 million a year from its Waukesha water customers, and a missed revenue opportunity for Milwaukee, which could really use it.

Denying Waukesha Lake Michigan water isn't going to stop urban sprawl. In a free society, it isn't going to convince people who want to live in the suburbs to become city-dwellers. Denying Lake Michigan water to Waukesha is not going to solve any of Milwaukee's problems. But Lake Michigan water could solve a big problem for Waukesha, which would be a very good thing for this region.

The Waukesha water application should be decided based on science, not local politics.

Andrew Weiland is editor of BizTimes Milwaukee.

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