

## **Duchniak: No cheaper alternative to Great Lakes diversion**

Describes plans for minimizing ‘shock’ of rate increases

**By Matt Masterson**

Freeman Staff

WAUKESHA — Some residents around Waukesha may have had a case of sticker shock after hearing their water rates could double or triple under the city’s newly approved Great Lakes diversion, but city officials say those rates would have gone up just as much — if not more — under any other alternative.

**Waukesha Water Utility** General Manager Dan Duchniak said each water source alternative reviewed by the city and state Department of Natural Resources would have cost residents upwards of \$200 million.

“We have looked at all of the alternatives in Waukesha, and that related to the deep aquifer, the shallow aquifer, surface waters like the quarries, the rivers, other lakes in the area and even going out to western Waukesha County,” Duchniak said. “We made the determination with the DNR — and (the Southeastern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission) also determined the same thing — that the only reasonable alternative was to go to the Great Lakes.”

The average homeowner currently pays around \$161 per quarter — or about \$644 per year — in water and sewer rates. Duchniak said only the water portion of that bill would double or triple under the new rates, meaning that in a worst-case scenario, residents would pay close to \$1,200 per year total for water and sewer.

That comes down to approximately \$50 per month for each utility, but those changes aren’t going to occur overnight.

“In order to minimize rate shock to our customers, we didn’t want to have just the rates increase all at one time,” Duchniak said. “So we are looking at a series of rate increases around 25 percent that will happen over a three- or four-year period.”

The increase in cost could also be mitigated somewhat by the soft water brought in from Lake Michigan, which could lessen the burden on household water softeners.

The rate changes may have come as a surprise to some, but the water utility has been prepping residents for years about the expected jump in annual costs.

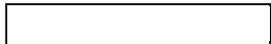
“We’ve done aldermanic meetings, open houses, open meetings with the Common Council and we’ve been very open with the public with regards to this,” Duchniak said, “that our rates were going to double if not triple depending on the funding that would be obtained.”

### **The path ahead**

Last week, governor appointees from the eight Great Lakes states unanimously approved Waukesha’s request to divert up to 8.2 million gallons of Great Lakes per day for the city’s service area by 2050.

City and state officials believe it could be four to five years until a pipeline bringing the water to Waukesha from the Oak Creek Water Utility is completed. Treated wastewater would then be returned to the Great Lakes basin via the Root River.

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**Waukesha Water Utility** General Manager Dan Duchniak.

Freeman file photo

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Water

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The cost estimate for the city’s Great Lakes diversion currently sits at \$207 million, but that number has not been finalized. Duchniak said three-quarters of the city’s funding is in place — via water utility bonds, low interest state loans and other means — but federal grants will also be sought.

The water utility has already released its request for proposal to engineering firms, and is working to finalize the pipeline route. Duchniak said the city has also enacted some of the water monitoring requirements enacted by the Great Lakes Compact Council, and is looking to get the project designed and started as quickly as possible.

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Waukesha's diversion had plenty of opposition from environmentalists who felt the city had other alternatives available to it, and Racine officials who believe Waukesha's discharged wastewater will be a detriment to the Root River.

State Rep. Cory Mason, DRacine, said the compact council's decision set a "horrible precedent" for the future of the Great Lakes Compact and felt the vote marked a "sad day for the city of Racine, for environmental justice, and for the future of the Compact."

But Duchniak said more than 470 of Wisconsin's 500plus wastewater treatment plants already discharge into rivers — including plants in Brookfield and Sussex that discharge into the Fox River, which flows through downtown Waukesha — and those waterways have not suffered any ill effects.

"We're going to have to meet strict standards," he said. "Our wastewater treatment plant is, if it's not the top, it's among the top wastewater treatment plants in the state. It puts out excellent, high-quality water and it will be a benefit to the Root River when we get that water there."