

Opponents cloud Waukesha water decision with false claims



Rick Wood

Waukesha Mayor Shawn Reilly speaks in favor of tapping Lake Michigan water for the City of Waukesha during a public hearing on Waukesha's request for a Lake Michigan water supply at Carroll University on Feb. 18.

By Shawn Reilly
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Waukesha needs a new water supply. Our groundwater supply is severely depleted. Naturally occurring contaminants are increasing. We are under a court order to comply with the federal drinking water standards for radium, a carcinogen. We are a leader in water conservation efforts, but conservation does not prevent our need for a new supply.

After a five-year review of our 3,000-page application and 22 subsequent memos, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources concluded that our only reasonable water supply alternative is to borrow and return Lake Michigan water under the Great Lakes Compact.

We will borrow 1/1,000,000 of 1% of Great Lakes water and return the same amount.

But a group calling itself the Compact Implementation Coalition (CIC) is opposing our application with a continuous campaign of misleading information that is being repeated by others.

One of CIC's false claims is that Waukesha could continue to use our current wells if we treat the water and serve a smaller service area than state law requires. They ignore the fact that the deep aquifer is severely depleted and is not a reliable long term water supply.

The DNR reviewed CIC's proposal and found it flawed. Among the errors are CIC's inflated capacities of our existing wells and its failure to consider that the proposed reverse osmosis treatment wastes 10% to 20% of the water supply. That means additional shallow aquifer wells would be necessary, harming 900 to 1,000 acres of wetlands. The DNR said that is unreasonable.

CIC also did not consider that water quality in the shallow aquifer is vulnerable to contamination. Waukesha recently had to suspend the use of two shallow wells because chloride levels exceeded secondary standards, potentially allowing corrosive water to enter our drinking water system.

Another false CIC claim is that Waukesha's application promotes growth. In fact, regional planners estimate our service area will only have 0.5% annual growth until build-out in about 2050. Only 15% of the service area is available for future development. CIC proposes that service not be provided to portions of communities adjacent to the city. But the city already is serving areas outside of its limits because of existing public health issues.

CIC's newest claim condemns "Waukesha's return of partially treated wastewater through the Root River" to Lake Michigan, even though that cannot happen. The treatment facility has been designed so that only water that has received advanced treatment can reach the start of the 20-mile pipe to the Root River and Lake Michigan. In the unlikely event of an overflow, the water would remain outside of the Lake Michigan Basin and outside of the Root River.

We are returning water via the Root River at the suggestion of DNR water management staff. The additional flow will improve fish passage and help a DNR fish egg collection facility. Our return flow water to the Root River is cleaner than the river.

CIC also claims that borrowing water under the Great Lakes Compact must be our "last resort." Again, this is untrue. The compact states a community must have "no reasonable water supply alternative." The Wisconsin DNR found this is true for Waukesha.

Finally, CIC promotes fears that approval of Waukesha's request will send Great Lakes water to distant places. The compact absolutely prohibits water from going beyond communities in counties that straddle the Great Lakes surface divide, like Waukesha. Approval of Waukesha's application will not change that fact.

Public health decisions must be made on the basis of thorough, long-term planning and scientific analysis. That is the basis of Waukesha's application. I am confident the Great Lakes governors will agree that borrowing Lake Michigan water is our only reasonable water supply alternative and will not harm the precious resources of the Great Lakes.

Shawn Reilly is the mayor of Waukesha.