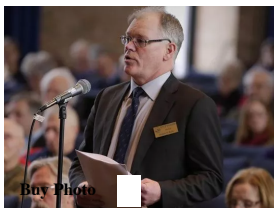


Milwaukee makes a splash with surprise bid to sell Lake Michigan water to Waukesha

Darryl Enriquez, darryl.enriquez@jrn.com Published 5:50 p.m. CT July 10, 2017 | Updated 6:55 p.m. CT July 10, 2017



(Photo: Rick Wood)

Waukesha should know within a few months whether Oak Creek or Milwaukee will supply the more than 70,000 residents here with drinking water, according to top city officials.

An unexpected offer from Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett's office to sell Lake Michigan water to Waukesha is now being studied by local water officials.

Water board members are expected to advise the Waukesha Common Council of their findings and recommend which of the two proposals is best for Waukesha.

New deal?

Water officials have touted for more than a year that a formal deal to buy lake water from Oak Creek would likely happen.

And last month, Oak Creek plans seemed to be reinforced when separate informational sessions were held in Muskego, New Berlin and Franklin outlining the possible paths of water pipes connecting Oak Creek and Waukesha.



Dan Duchniak, Waukesha water utility general manager (Photo: Submitted)

But on May 15, Milwaukee submitted its own proposal, details of which the Waukesha Water Utility is keeping secret for now, general manager Dan Duchniak said. The proposal came on the heels of a letter of intent expiring with Oak Creek, he added.

News of the Milwaukee offer began to surface as Waukesha officials met in recent closed meetings to deliberate Barrett's offer.

"We (currently) are not negotiating with Milwaukee," Duchniak stressed in an interview Monday, July 10. "We're analyzing a proposal they made for four points: operating costs, the cost of the water, technical issues and capital costs."

Duchniak would not say why Barrett's office decided to submit a bid.

Mayoral roles

Waukesha's mayor also stressed that the city is merely trying to determine which offer is the best deal for the city.

"The Milwaukee proposal is being analyzed thoroughly and seriously," Waukesha Mayor Shawn Reilly said. "We have a duty to look at it carefully."

Milwaukee was originally Waukesha's first choice for a lake water partnership. But prior to 2010, then-Mayor Larry Nelson ran into a wall of demands from Milwaukee that centered on social issues and underprivileged housing in order to get water.

Negotiations further deteriorated with Milwaukee when Nelson's successor, Mayor Jeff Scrima, was openly hostile to Milwaukee and plans for lake water, in general.

Under Reilly, who was elected in 2014, project planning on local and national levels has stepped up, which included trips to the nation's capitol to pursue federal money.

Costs to consider

Officials are likely to carefully consider all cost factors and other issues that could impact the water infrastructure.

For instance, in the Oak Creek plan, the length of pipeline pathways vary from 20 to 23 miles. The Milwaukee pipeline would be much shorter, Reilly noted.

The pipes are needed to pump lake water to Waukesha from Oak Creek and return water cleaned in Waukesha to the Root River in Franklin.

Analysts also are tasked with updating the project cost that in 2012 was estimated at slightly more than \$200 million.

Important to the analysis is how treatment chemicals that differ in Milwaukee and Oak Creek water supplies would affect residential water pipes and the water system as a whole, Reilly said.

The concern is that certain chemicals are corrosive to lead pipes in older homes and could release lead from those pipes into drinking water, he said.

Federal order

Water officials for nearly two decades have pursued plans to obtain lake water and vastly reduce use of groundwater. Those plans were created with advice from state planning and natural resource agencies.

Waukesha is under federal order to decrease the level of radium in its drinking water. The order is being administered by the state Department of Natural Resources and calls for corrective actions to be in place by next year, though provisions reportedly allow for an extension if steps are being taken to comply with the order.

Duchniak said he's hopeful that an approved water diversion plan reached next year will be enough to receive an extension.

Radium is a naturally occurring substance in groundwater. It is linked to cancer. Waukesha obtains groundwater for its more than 70,000 residents from the deep aquifer.

Waukesha received permission to seek Lake Michigan water under the Great Lakes Compact exclusion, which allow cities within a county that straddles the lake's basin area to apply for lake water diversion under limited circumstances.

The ruling body voted in favor of the Waukesha application in 2016 and reaffirmed that decision earlier this year.

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