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Dickert-led organization will not sue over Waukesha water plan

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Racine Mayor John Dickert, right, answers a question Thursday afternoon, Feb. 4, 2016, during “On the Issues with Mike Gousha.” The program was about Waukesha’s water diversion request, which Dickert’s new organization, the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Cities Initiative, was challenging until reaching a settlement.

GREGORY SHAVER, Journal Times file photo

RACINE — The Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Cities Initiative, now led by former Racine Mayor John Dickert, will not sue over Waukesha's planned Great Lakes water diversion, the organization announced Wednesday.

The Cities Initiative reached an agreement with the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River Basin Water Resources Council (Compact Council), a group made up of representatives from all eight Great Lakes states.

Under the agreement, the Cities Initiative will drop its challenge to Waukesha's diversion application in exchange for a "rigorous" review of the Compact Council's process for considering future diversions, the Cities Initiative said in a news release.

"We appreciate the tremendous consideration the Compact Council has given us," said Dickert, president and CEO of the Cities Initiative. "This mutually beneficial settlement agreement has set the foundation for meaningful progress to safeguard our valuable water resources."

The agreement avoids a legal challenge to Waukesha's plan to divert an average of 8.2 million gallons of Lake Michigan water per day and return treated wastewater to the lake via the Root River.

Racine officials battled against the plan for some time amid concerns about the impact on the Root and the precedent it sets for other communities to get lake water. The Waukesha Water Utility argues the water discharged into the river will be clean and improve the river's health.

The Compact Council approved Waukesha's diversion last year. Dickert and Peter Johnson, the Compact Council's deputy director, agreed the settlement will lead to a more transparent review process.

"When you're negotiating a settlement like this, there are areas that you win and lose on," Dickert said. "We felt that our best bet, rather than challenge in court, was to work on a better process."

Added Johnson, "The Compact Council and regional body will be launching a process that will look at the procedures used to review and update diversion proposals. The primary goals are to ensure any future diversion applications be reviewed in a transparent and effective manner."

Thorough analysis

According to a release from the Cities Initiative, the review will examine "many aspects" of the process, including public hearings and engagement.

"Our challenge has always been about improving the compact to ensure the protection of our water resources," said Paul Dyster, mayor of Niagara Falls, N.Y., and chairman of the Cities Initiative. "We want to make sure future applications for diversion are subject to robust and detailed standards of evaluation and a thorough process allowing input from impacted stakeholders."

Officials plan to review a first draft of proposed recommendations in June 2018, with adoption of changes possible in December 2018, according to the Cities Initiative release.

Waukesha tentatively plans to begin construction of pipelines in 2019. Monitoring of the Root River began in February as officials gather baseline information before treated wastewater from Waukesha flows down the tributary.

Mark Schaaf contributed to this report.

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