

Going with the flow: Information about Waukesha's water plans ripples from Great Water Alliance

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(Photo: Michael Sears/Milwaukee Journal Sentinel)

WAUKESHA - When all is said and done, Waukesha will have water flowing to and from Lake Michigan to satisfy its long-term water needs.

But what will happen between now and then?

That's the topic of a meeting of the Great Water Alliance set for 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. Wednesday, Sept. 6, at the Waukesha Rotary Building, 1150 Baxter St., Waukesha.

Building an alliance

The Great Water Alliance is the brand name given to an initiative by the city to educate and unite the public, including the various communities involved in the water diversion project, concerning Waukesha's quest to use lake water.

In a postcard sent out in late August, the Great Water Alliance said it was holding the Sept. 6 open house to allow everyone to "immerse yourself in the facts about Waukesha's plan to borrow water from Lake Michigan, the pipeline that will carry treated water to the Root River, and the program's implementation and what it means to you."

"It's about opening up lines of communication for our project – reaching out to the public and trying to inform them what's happening with the Great Water Alliance and our quest for Great Lakes water," Dan Duchniak, Waukesha Water Utility general manager, said this week.

Duchniak anticipates that people attending the open house will have varied concerns, including concerns about water quality, environmental impacts and project costs.

"There will be stations all around the room, and there will be different people there to answer questions the public may have," he said.

The open house will address issues that have been previously made public for those unaware of what has transpired up until this point.

Slow-flow timeline

The water diversion project stems from a decades-long effort by the city to comply with a federal standard to reduce or eliminate radium in Waukesha's water supply.

Over the years, the city began to focus on sources other than groundwater due to concerns about how sustainable those aquifers would be in providing ample and safe drinking water locally.

Eventually, a study was initiated to compare groundwater with the option of drawing water from Lake Michigan. The exhaustive study – which involved state and local officials – concluded that the city's best approach was borrow lake water.

Before that concept could move forward, the city had to obtain unanimous approval from the Great Lakes states under a restrictive compact. The agreement allows lake water to be diverted by communities that exist within counties that at least straddle the historic lake watershed basin. Waukesha qualified under that exception.

Ultimately, the city gained the required approval in June 2016, a decision that was reaffirmed earlier this year in response to appeals by those opposed to the plan. In March, opposition from several groups, includes one consisting lake states mayors, ebbed as the proposal's legal standing strengthened.

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Finding its way

While the legal challenges may have dried up, the actual project is still in its earliest stages.

The work involves building a pipeline with its contracted lake water supplier to bring the water into Waukesha, and another infrastructure to return an equal amount of treated water back to the lake through pipelines leading to the Root River.

Duchniak said the six-year process is already underway.

"We are in the process of going through the permitting and designing the project," Duchniak said. "We basically need to go through a routing study -- look at the route we are going to take with the pipeline. In conjunction with that, we go through the permitting effort -- not only the water supply permit for bringing the water to Waukesha but then returning the water to the Great Lakes Basin."

That stage of the process is expected to be completed at some point in 2018.

The Great Water Alliance held informational meetings in June and July in Franklin, New Berlin and Muskego -- communities that could be part of the watery pathway to and from Waukesha and the lake -- to discuss the options still under consideration.

"Once we get through that, we will finalize design and begin construction, and hopefully we'll have the project complete by 2023," Duchniak said.

The city still has yet to decide who its water-supplying partner will be -- Oak Creek or Milwaukee. Oak Creek submitted a proposal to the city in 2015, but Milwaukee offered an unsolicited bid earlier this year.

"We are hopeful that we will have a decision (soon)," he said. "We were hoping it would be in September, but now I'm thinking a September/October timeframe."

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