

Who will sell Waukesha water? That question still has to be answered.

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(Photo: Michael Sears/Milwaukee Journal Sentinel)

WAUKESHA - The flow of water from Lake Michigan to the city hasn't quite found its way around the long decision-making process just yet.

In the latest wave of that process, the Waukesha Common Council met for nearly an hour in closed session on Tuesday, Oct. 3, to discuss negotiations on a water deal that would bring lake water to the city.

Two parties – Oak Creek and Milwaukee – have submitted bids, but to date Waukesha hasn't committed to either as it continues to evaluate which deal is in the best interests of the city.

The council did not discuss the water agreement or have any further comment in open session.

Still pending

Following the closed session and in a followup interview, City Administrator Kevin Lahner said he didn't anticipate a decision on the water agreement for at least another two or three weeks, stretching into late October or possibly early November.



Kevin Lahner (Photo: File photo)

Though he could not discuss the details of the discussions, Lahner said the focus is still on evaluating both contract proposals and the costs associated with them.

"It's really just an evaluation of proposals and what's best for Waukesha. That's really what's going on," Lahner said.

Despite the long process, the city now at least has time to proceed carefully. Earlier this year, Waukesha was given an extension until 2023 to meet a federal requirement to reduce the radium concentration in the city's water supply.

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In an earlier interview, Dan Duchniak, Waukesha's Water Utility general manager, said he hopes to have the lake water system built and in place well before the new deadline.

Lahner concurred, noting that the deliberate decision-making process isn't a threat to any immediate deadlines.

"We do have to keep the project moving because of the (federal) consent order timeline that we have, but we don't think that the decision coming within the next month is going to impact anything significantly," he said.

In a separate closed session later in the meeting, the council also discussed the purchase of public lands pertaining to the water deal, but no details were released in open session.

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Looking back

Despite the lingering decision, the city has advanced in other key areas of the process to date.

The idea to tap into Lake Michigan dates back decades and eventually became the subject of an extensive study that considered all of the city's options. That study, conducted in conjunction with the state's Department of Natural Resources, ultimately determined that only the lake water option would be a sustainable source for the city, rather than using aquifer groundwater sources that are already depleted.

The study faced challenges from various political and environmental groups, who continued their objections to the ruling body of the Great Lakes Compact, which limits which communities can even be considered to receive lake water.

Ultimately, governors of the Great Lakes states agreed with the study, and reaffirmed their decision through one final round of political challenges earlier this year.

Once the city decides who its water partner will be, the final design of the water pipelines can be completed. The plan calls for incoming water to be piped from the lake through the southern suburbs of Milwaukee, possibly through Franklin, New Berlin and Muskego.

The water must also return 100 percent of the amount of water drawn from the lake back to the lake. That system will involve piping treated water to the Root River, which naturally flows into Lake Michigan.

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