

Water Utility chief provides update

Waukesha to receive Lake Michigan water in late summer

GREAT LAKES WATER PROJECT

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WAUKESHA — Come late August/early September, Waukesha will make the switch from groundwater to Lake Michigan water.

Waukesha Water Utility General Manager Dan Duchniak reports that the pipeline connecting Waukesha to the lake is 95 percent complete, with the remaining work to be done occurring mostly within Milwaukee, but that's not all that needs to be wrapped up to start the transition.

“There are a number of different elements to the project, it's not just the pipeline itself,” Duchniak said. “Once the pipeline is complete, we have to wait until the water supply pump station that the city of Milwaukee is installing is complete and our reservoirs and booster station is complete. Those should be complete around the end of July/early August.”

Afterward, WWU will test the main lines and flush them, with the high volume of water being discharged into one of the reservoirs. “We will drain the reservoirs once we flush that, clean out the reservoirs, disinfect them, and then we will open up the valves, fill the reservoirs with the water,” Duchniak said. “Then once the water is filled in the reservoirs and it's tested and [sampled], then we'll start pumping that water into the distribution system to our customers.”

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Duchniak

Water

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Possible temporary changes

When the transition takes place, residents in Waukesha might notice some temporary changes in water quality. The water could take on a red or discolored appearance “if something is stirred up in the system, which typically happens during flushing.”

Should your water appear discolored, Duchniak advises refraining from doing laundry, as it could potentially tint clothing. If you do wash your clothing then and it takes on the color of the water, avoid drying it. Instead, contact WWU as they can provide you with an iron-removing product to add to your laundry to eliminate the coloring.

Residents might also notice that their water smells or tastes like chlorine. WWU is switching to a chloramine disinfectant, which is a combination of chlorine and ammonia. In order to properly disinfect, the chlorine levels are raised. Despite the potential change to smell or taste, the water is safe for humans to consume and bathe in.

“During this time, the water will be safe to drink. The water will be safe to consume. Once we get it changed over to the new water supply, we will reduce the chlorine levels to the levels they are used to seeing,” Duchniak said.

Residents who own fish, amphibians, reptiles, or other aquarium-dwelling creatures should talk to their local pet supply store about how to properly care for their pets at this time, as the change in chlorine levels could potentially impact the animals.

WWU has been reaching out to medical professionals, kidney dialysis centers, food manufacturers, and other businesses to discuss the temporary change in water quality. If you undergo medical treatment that utilizes treated water, like kidney dialysis, it is recommended that you speak to your doctor.

Some residents could experience a change in water pressure when the systems are flushed and switched over. The central pressure zone, which is a line of properties from Moreland Boulevard and the northern side of Waukesha stretching toward the southwest side of the city toward Waukesha West High School, may witness a 10-12 PSI increase when the new water tower comes online.

Duchniak emphasizes that these changes to water quality are temporary, lasting two weeks to one month. Once the system has been fully converted to Lake Michigan water, the water should once again become colorless and WWU will reduce the chlorine to normal levels and the smell and taste will subside.

No need to register

Residents will automatically be switched to the new water system; there is no need to register for Lake Michigan water. “It will be a seamless transition,” Duchniak said. “After about one day, once we start the transition, about half the customers will have it. After about three days, about 75 percent of the customers will have it. It will take up to 10 days to two weeks for all of the people at the extremities of the system to get the water.”

During this time, there won't be any gaps in service. People will always have water at their homes.

Eliminating radium; water softeners optional

By switching to Lake Michigan water, the issue of radium in the water will be completely eliminated. Duchniak notes that one misconception about Waukesha groundwater is that it is contaminated by radon. That is not true, as radon is gaseous. Radium is the element that is currently present in the groundwater. The switch to lake water “will mitigate the radium issue. It will be addressed and it will be a sustainable water source for the long term for the residents of the city,” Duchniak said. “They will never have to worry about radium again.”

Another benefit of the transition is that, according to Duchniak, Lake Michigan's water is at least 60 percent softer than groundwater. This makes water softeners completely optional. “Water softeners will be a personal choice. It will be for each homeowner to decide if they want to keep or not,” Duchniak said. “95 percent of the people who have switched over from groundwater to lake water have within three years eliminated their water softeners.”

Those who do choose to keep their water softeners must optimize them.

When it comes to water filtration systems, like those made by Brita or similar companies, Duchniak reports that those won't be necessary. “Those are things that are personal choice, if people want to use Brita filters or filtered water systems for their drinking water in their refrigerators. The only thing I will say to that is those people need to be sure they are maintained properly, otherwise bacteria can grow in those filters. It can be harmful bacteria.”

Otherwise, Duchniak said “people can drink straight from the tap.”

Price increases

An increase in price will accompany the switch to Lake Michigan water. Right now, the average Waukesha resident pays \$95 per month for water. That number is expected to jump to \$155 for average monthly consumption.

However, \$155 is not a flat rate. “The water rates are volumetric based,” Duchniak said. “The more water you use, the more you’re going to pay.”

According to Duchniak, that average cost is right in line with the numbers WWU announced seven years ago and with what other communities pay for Great Lakes water. “That is consistent with the numbers we put out in 2016. We are on or below budget. We are on or below projections. We are really proud of the fact that we’ve been able to do that. With the combination of the water going up, if people choose to eliminate their water softeners, it’ll be really consistent with what other communities are paying for their water.”

WWU also actively works to save water and save money.

“We have a very aggressive conservation program,” Duchniak said. “We provide \$100 for high-flow toilets to be replaced with low-flow toilets. We have a shower head replacement program, and we have a rain barrel program. We also have been working with businesses throughout the community to reduce their water use.”

Between now and late August/early September when the switch happens, WWU will continue to keep the community updated on the project and let residents know how to prepare for Lake Michigan water. Those curious about the project can attend the WWU open house for a presentation and Q& A in the Council Chambers at City Hall on May 4 from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. or May 6 from 10 a.m. to noon.

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