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Waukesha is pleased with DNR's completeness determination for Great Lakes water application

Waukesha officials expressed pride in reaching an important milestone in their efforts to find a new long-term water supply for the city, as Department of Natural Resources announced today that Waukesha's application for Great Lakes water is complete.

"It's another step in the process, but it's a significant one," said Dan Warren, president of the Waukesha Water Utility Commission. "It has taken a lot of careful, thorough work to get here. The DNR has said we provided them the information they need to conduct their independent review of the science and data in our application that led to our conclusions."

Waukesha's application concludes that Lake Michigan is the only reasonable long-term water supply option for the city. "No other water supply alternative is as sustainable, affordable, or protective of the environment and public health, as Lake Michigan," according to Common Council President Paul Ybarra.

As part of its review, the DNR will hold public hearings this summer. "We are confident that an informed public will agree with our conclusion that there is no safer or more sustainable long-term alternative to meet the needs of our community," Warren said.

Ybarra added that he is "proud of the years of work and dedication that utility staff, city staff, elected officials and technical experts have provided to develop the comprehensive information and analysis that is included in the application. We also greatly appreciate the assistance and professionalism of the DNR staff in helping us arrive at this important milestone."

The DNR's review evaluates the environmental, public health, sustainability, reliability and financial impacts of the Lake Michigan proposal, and compares them to alternatives, according to Dan Duchniak, general manager of the utility. After the DNR's approval, the application must also be approved by the governors of all the Great Lakes states, under the terms of the Great Lakes Compact. "We are cautiously optimistic that our application is moving toward our goal of a sustainable water supply," he said.

As the DNR completes its work reviewing the application, Waukesha will also be negotiating with potential water suppliers in Milwaukee, Oak Creek or Racine. Any proposed agreement will need the approval of the Waukesha Common Council. Duchniak said the goal is to complete those negotiations before the application goes to the governors of the other Great Lakes states for their approval.

The Waukesha Common Council voted on two separate occasions last year to endorse the application for Lake Michigan water, by votes of 14-1 in April 2010 and 13-1 in July 2010. The city's original application consisted of 2,000 pages of information, but has been supplemented by nearly 1,000 pages of additional information.

Waukesha's current deep aquifer water supply contains radium and higher concentrations of dissolved solids. The deep aquifer has dropped 500 to 600 feet. "City wells are pumping water from wells drilled 2,000 feet below ground. They are aging and becoming more unreliable," Warren said. "We recently had a deep aquifer radium treatment facility temporarily fail because it was pumping sand. However, the real issue is that the current water source is unsustainable for the long term. It makes no sense to invest significant amounts of money in the deep aquifer source that has become more unreliable with time and will eventually fail."

Duchniak said shallow groundwater alternatives are also not reasonable. Use of the shallow aquifer would result in permanent impacts to thousands of acres of wetland habitats from groundwater drawdowns. Quarry water and riverbank inducement were also both found to have public health and environmental drawbacks.

"Our area is one of only two that have been designated as Groundwater Management Areas by the state Legislature because our groundwater problems are both real and significant," Ybarra said. "Alternatives to a Lake Michigan water supply are not healthy and sustainable. With Lake Michigan, we will recycle the water back to the lake after using it and treating it. We can't do that with groundwater."