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Milwaukee suburbs to look at Lake Michigan water

Grafton, Cedarburg, Mequon listed in SEWRPC plan

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By [Don Behm](#) of the Journal Sentinel

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Water utility managers from Grafton and Cedarburg have resolved in the new year to join Mequon in studying the feasibility of serving Lake Michigan water to residents and businesses of the three communities from a single treatment facility on the lakeshore.

The proposal is a hybrid of a Southeastern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission recommendation to convert Grafton and Cedarburg - and several other Milwaukee-area communities - from groundwater wells to a lake water supply within a few decades. The commission's [Regional Water Supply Plan](#) envisions the two communities pairing up to build a treatment plant on the lake or buying water from Port Washington.

In all, the advisory plan advocates converting nine municipal utilities from groundwater to the lake by 2035, plus creating a water utility for a 10th municipality, Elm Grove, that would buy lake water. Elm Grove property owners now depend on private wells.

The City of Waukesha is among the nine municipalities recommended to make the switch and the only one that is seeking a lake supply at this time. Since all of Waukesha is outside the Great Lakes basin, its application must obtain approval from each of the eight Great Lakes states. Waukesha would abandon several deep wells drawing radium-tainted water from a sandstone aquifer if its request is approved.

The regional water supply plan published this month is a road map to guide communities toward adequate and safe water supplies in the future, said Mike Hahn, the commission's chief environmental engineer. The plan recommends steps to take to abate existing or possible future supply problems, as well as steps that can be

taken to preserve and protect those supplies. It is all advice for the communities; none of it is mandatory.

One reason for the commission's recommendation that the 10 communities stop using groundwater is the goal of restoring historic water levels in deep aquifers, particularly the sandstone, Hahn said. Aquifers are layers of bedrock saturated with water. Levels in the deep sandstone beneath southeastern Wisconsin have dropped between 500 and 600 feet in the last century.

By switching to the lake, those communities would avoid higher costs of pumping water from increasing depths if the aquifers were allowed to decline further, and avoid possible treatment costs if increasing levels of radium and salt were encountered.

The proposed switch looks attractive to utility officials in Grafton and Cedarburg, where toxic chemicals are present in a few wells. Grafton removes chemicals from two of its six wells and is closely monitoring low levels of contaminants in two others. Two of five wells in Cedarburg are treated for chemicals. One of the other wells is shut down while a treatment facility is designed and built.

"In the long term, 10 to 20 years, lake water is going to have the least problems," said Grafton Water & Wastewater Utility Director Thomas Krueger. But further study is needed to determine the cost and where to tap into the lake, he said.

Mequon would be expected to gradually expand its existing lake water service area, according to the regional water-supply plan. The Mequon Water Utility currently buys lake water from Milwaukee and the North Shore Water Commission for customers in the southeast quarter of the city, Thiensville and Bayside.

Connection to Mequon's public water system is voluntary for existing homes and businesses, City Administrator Lee Szymborski said. New development is required to hook up to the system.

The other well-dependent utilities tagged for conversion to the lake are Saukville, Germantown, eastern City of Brookfield, an additional section of central New Berlin, much of Muskego and a portion of the Town of Yorkville.

Since Mequon began offering lake water to its residents in 1999, the closing of private wells has allowed water levels in the dolomite aquifer beneath the city to rebound 40 feet, said Mike Rau, president of City Water LLC, the contractor hired by Mequon to operate its water utility.

Among the SEWRPC plan's other findings:

- Most water utilities in the seven-county region, a total of 60, have adequate existing supplies and won't need to change in the next 25 years, other than possible expansion. Thirty-three of those communities rely on groundwater, while 27 of the utilities serve Lake Michigan water.
- The Cities of Delavan and Elkhorn, Village of Union Grove and Town of Bristol should follow Hartford's lead in reducing reliance on the deep sandstone aquifer by taking more water from aquifers closer to the surface.
- Four other utilities had been considered for a switch to lake water, but the commission recommended boosting withdrawals from shallow aquifers while continuing to use the deep aquifer. They are the western City and Town of Brookfield, City of Pewaukee, Village of Pewaukee and Village of Sussex.
- All water utilities should implement water conservation programs that could reduce average daily demand between 4% and 10%.

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