

Opinion Editorial: Land and Water Use Go Hand in Hand
By Jodi Habush Sinykin, Of Counsel, Midwest Environmental Advocates
August 11, 2005

As the debate goes round and round about whether Waukesha should be allowed to divert Lake Michigan water to use in the Mississippi River Basin, there is little attention paid to the connection between Waukesha's water woes and chosen land use path.

Waukesha's population growth over the past two decades has been dramatic - - A 13 percent increase between 1980 and 1990 and another 12 percent between 1990 and 2000. By the year 2030, the city's population is estimated to grow another 27 percent from the year 2000.

In pace with these population projections, Waukesha has expanded its boundary lines significantly. Over the past 20 years, Waukesha has increased in size from 15.5 square miles to 23.6 square miles, reflecting a 52 percent expansion.

Will this trend continue? The answer is a resounding yes. Official figures show that over the next 25 years, the total residential acreage in the City of Waukesha is expected to grow by over 130 percent.

The most growth is expected in low density residential development of one to two homes per acre, ranging in costs from \$400,000 to \$700,000.

Moreover, annexations of property bordering the City occur on a weekly basis, as developers buy farmland and then petition the City for annexation. In the last five years, over 1,300 acres, much of which had been prime farmland, have been annexed by Waukesha, with over 4,413 total acres annexed in the past fifteen years.

Likewise, major expansions are planned for the water service boundaries of the Waukesha Water Utility consistent with the areas it demarcated for "urban growth" or sprawl. Rather than limiting expansion of the service area in consideration of the city's growing water problems, the Utility's Master Plan provides for the expansion of the city's service boundaries both south and west of the city's current corporate limits to provide an additional 13 square miles of developable land.

Waukesha appears to be exacerbating its water woes by failing to implement land use practices to lessen its need for water. Waukesha could be implementing land use planning that curtails annexations, establishes open space requirements, identifies and encourages groundwater recharge opportunities or advances other conservation-minded objectives.

Instead, such land use plans and ordinances are still, at best, in the infant stages.

Unlike Milwaukee or Brookfield, whose expansion is limited by neighboring cities' boundaries, Waukesha can expand its borders until growth brings it up against other growing municipalities, like the Town of Genesee and Delafield.

Unless Waukesha undertakes containment measures, the city's outward sprawl will continue unabated, property-by-property, acre-by-acre, development-by-development. The result: an ever-growing demand for water at odds with an ever-declining supply.

By now it is common knowledge that water levels in the deep aquifer underlying Waukesha continue to drop 5 to 10 feet per year, and that the Utility's withdrawal of water has exceeded aquifer recharge rates for decades.

While recent conservation efforts undertaken by the Utility should be both praised and encouraged, we should not forget that the city has, until now, done very little to implement conservation measures or resource-protective land use planning.

It is hard to imagine Waukesha responsibly addressing its water scarcity problems until it stops annexing the land around it, passes and implements ordinances to promote conservation-oriented land use.

And it must take the lead to secure a regional commitment to prevent paving over land through which rain, snowmelt and surface waters naturally recharge the underground supply.

A diversion of Lake Michigan water to Waukesha will only fuel more sprawl and defeat the region's much-needed comprehensive commercial and residential water conservation.

Until Waukesha becomes a regional leader in land and water stewardship, it should be discouraged from seeking Lake Michigan water. Better management of the water it has should be Waukesha's number one priority.