Oswego's Journey to Lake Michigan Water

It's hard to believe that water scarcity can be a problem when every time you turn on the tap, water is just there. Most people don't think twice about whether clean water will keep flowing tomorrow, next year, or decades from now. But in some parts of Illinois, the long-term availability of water is a very real concern - one that can't be solved by waiting for a crisis.

While droughts tend to get the most attention, the quieter issue is groundwater depletion. According to the Illinois State Water Survey, several communities in the southwest suburbs of Chicago are projected to face serious challenges meeting future water demands as existing wells become less reliable. Looking ahead to 2050 and beyond, continuing to rely solely on groundwater could leave communities vulnerable at exactly the time they are growing and changing the most.

Recognizing this risk, the Village of Oswego collaborated with its neighbors, the Village of Montgomery and the United City of Yorkville, and began asking an important question: What does a sustainable water future really look like? In 2017, the three communities launched a thorough evaluation of alternative water supply options. These water supply options included developing a new Fox River intake and treatment facility or securing Lake Michigan water through regional providers such as the DuPage Water Commission, the Grand Prairie Water Commission, or Illinois American Water.

After years of analysis and discussion, Oswego ultimately joined Montgomery and Yorkville to form WaterLink, a regional partnership that will deliver Lake Michigan water through the DuPage Water Commission. While the decision itself was significant, it marked the beginning—not the end—of a long and complex journey.

Turning a Big Decision into Reality

Transitioning to a new water source requires far more than infrastructure alone. Since committing to Lake Michigan water, Oswego has undertaken a wide range of projects to ensure the system will be reliable, efficient, and protective of public health.

To begin, the Village needed legal approval to divert water from Lake Michigan. Illinois carefully manages these diversions to protect Lake Michigan's long-term sustainability, requiring communities to meet strict criteria and undergo extensive review. Oswego applied for a permit, participated in multiple hearings with the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, and provided detailed technical documentation. In August 2023, the Village received its Lake Michigan Allocation—a major milestone in the process.

At the same time, Oswego focused inward, improving its existing distribution system. Since 2020, the Village has replaced or installed approximately 14 miles of water main. These upgrades targeted aging infrastructure, improved redundancy, and supported new

development, while also reducing calculated non-revenue water from 11 percent to 6 percent over six years.

Preparing for Lake Michigan water also means understanding how a new water source will interact with existing pipes. Because a change in source water chemistry can affect corrosion potential in the water distribution system, the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency requires a Corrosion Control Treatment study. Oswego's study includes more than a year of pipe rig testing and data collection to determine whether additional treatment will be necessary to protect the distribution system.

On the regional side, the DuPage Water Commission will construct approximately 30 miles of new transmission main, ranging from 16 to 54 inches in diameter, to deliver water from a connection point in Naperville and traveling southwest to multiple connection points in all three communities. Within Oswego, three receiving stations will manage pressure, boost disinfectant residuals, meter incoming flows, and provide critical storage, including a one-million-gallon ground-level tank at the Village's main station.

Bringing the Community Along

Projects of this scale don't succeed without public understanding and trust. From the beginning, Oswego recognized that explaining why a new water source is needed is just as important as explaining what is being built.

Because water shortages aren't immediately visible, helping residents understand the long-term risks of groundwater depletion has been a critical part of the process. Communicating the difference between short-term drought conditions and long-term aquifer sustainability has helped frame the project not as a reaction to a crisis, but as a proactive investment in the future for generations to come.

Ensuring affordability has also been a core part of the process. Through participation in the WIFIA funding program, Oswego completed a detailed rate study to forecast revenues and expenditures and understand how this generational investment will affect water rates.

A Regional Investment in the Future

By working together, the three WaterLink communities are reducing long-term costs, minimizing regional construction impacts, and preserving groundwater resources for surrounding areas.

Brad Reese, Oswego's Assistant Director of Public Works, said the following about this major undertaking: "While the project presents its share of complexities and challenges, it is equally rewarding to know that our efforts will provide a reliable, high-quality supply of Lake Michigan water to the community for generations to come."

By the spring of 2028, residents will experience the result of years of planning with their first sip of clean Lake Michigan water.