

Pulling water from Lake Michigan for Foxconn plant approved

Foxconn expects to begin construction on a \$10 billion flat-screen plant in Mount Pleasant within weeks. The city of Racine filed a request with the DNR in January to withdraw 7 million gallons of water daily from the lake to serve the plant. The city's application estimated about 2.7 million gallons will be consumed daily by plant operations and evaporation. The rest will be treated and returned to the lake.

The application, approved Wednesday, drew fierce opposition from conservationists. They argued Foxconn has a poor environmental record in China and Japan and pulling water from the lake for a corporation would violate a Great Lakes Compact requirement that such withdrawals be done for public uses.

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Environmental group Clean Wisconsin said in a news release that the withdrawal clearly won't be used for public purposes and the organization was weighing its options. Spokesman Jonathan Drewsen said that could include filing a lawsuit.

"This diversion is an unprecedented betrayal of the Great Lakes Compact," Wisconsin League of Conservation Voters Executive Director Kerry Schumann said in a statement.

The Great Lakes Compact is an agreement between the Great Lakes states, Ontario and Quebec that prohibits diverting water from the lakes' basin. However, communities such as Mount Pleasant that straddle the basin boundary can withdraw Great Lakes water for public use. Municipalities such as Racine that supply straddling communities with water can make a withdrawal request on behalf of those communities.

Such withdrawals aren't subject to review by the compact's governing bodies, the Great Lakes St. Lawrence River Basin Water Resources Council and the Great Lakes St. Lawrence River Water Resources Regional Body, as long as the withdrawal consumes less than 5 million gallons daily.

"The (Foxconn) developers chose Mount Pleasant because it is a straddling community, which allows them to avoid scrutiny by Great Lakes states and Canadian provinces," Schumann said. "Those states and provinces designed the compact to protect that water from raids just like this one."

DNR officials said in a news release that part of the withdrawal would serve residential customers in Mount Pleasant, satisfying the public use requirement. The agency downplayed the impact of the withdrawal, saying it would amount to only a 0.07 percent increase in total surface water withdrawal from Lake Michigan. The annual water loss would amount to about .0025 inches, about the thickness of a sheet of paper, the news release said.

Foxconn issued its own release saying it was pleased with the DNR's decision and the environment is a company priority. The company promised to work to reduce water consumption, reuse wastewater and invest in new technologies for treating wastewater.

Local leaders praised the DNR's decision as well. Mount Pleasant Village President David DeGroot said the withdrawal will provide clean, safe water to the Foxconn plant and the thousands of workers it's expected to employ. Racine Mayor Cory Mason, who helped pass the compact through the Wisconsin Legislature as a Democratic member of the state assembly, said he believes the application meets the compact standards. He pledged to ensure Foxconn meets or exceeds every federal, state and local water standards.

The DNR approved air pollution permits for the plant Tuesday.

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