

When Neighbors Stop Being Neighbors: Cedarburg Faces a Water Crisis and Government Silence

Historic mill town built on mutual aid now confronts unprecedented private appropriation of public water as state officials remain silent

TOWN OF CEDARBURG, WI -- In the past, if you borrowed a cup of sugar from your neighbor in Cedarburg, you brought two cups back the next day. That's the kind of community this was -- built by German immigrants fleeing persecution in the 1840s, raised on limestone quarried from local land, powered by water that belonged to everyone who lived along Cedar Creek.

Today, Michael and Stacy Gauthier are asking their 134 nearest neighbors to give them up to 35 million gallons of water from that same creek and aquifer -- for an indefinite period of time -- and they're offering nothing in return. Not for the community. Not for the watershed. Not even a promise that the wells won't run dry.

More than 100 residents packed the Town Board meeting on November 5 to voice their alarm. They've been writing letters to the editor, reaching out to state agencies, and trying to get answers from anyone who will listen. But as of today, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources has been silent. The Governor's office has been silent. And the people of Cedarburg are left to wonder: when did our community's water become someone else's private playground?

A Town That Remembers What It Means to Share

Cedarburg isn't like other places. This is the town that saved its historic covered bridge -- Wisconsin's last one -- when other communities were tearing down the old to build the new. This is the town that preserved its woolen mills and limestone buildings in the 1970s when demolition would have been easier and cheaper. This is a place where people know each other's names, where the annual Strawberry Festival isn't just tourism, it's homecoming.

The town was founded on the idea that Cedar Creek belonged to everyone. German immigrants built grist mills and woolen mills along its banks because the water was a shared resource that powered shared prosperity. When William S. Hamilton -- Alexander Hamilton's son -- stayed overnight at the stagecoach stop, the community that grew up around it took his name. Not because of wealth or status, but because of a moment of hospitality, a place to rest.

That's the Cedarburg way. Or it was.

The New Cedarburg: Private Lakes for Millionaires While Neighbors' Wells Run Dry

The Gauthiers own Gauthier Biomedical, a successful medical device company in nearby Grafton that employs about 75 people and supplies surgical instruments to companies like Medtronic and Johnson & Johnson. Good for them. Nobody in Cedarburg begrudges success.

But success doesn't entitle you to 35 million gallons of your neighbors' water so you can go water skiing.

According to CBS 58, the project would require that massive initial fill -- equivalent to the annual water consumption of more than 600 Wisconsin households -- plus ongoing daily water use of up to 50,000 gallons to compensate for evaporation and seepage. The water would come from Cedar Creek, which already drops to minimal depths during summer months, and from a private well tapping the same aquifer that supplies surrounding homes.

Robert Chesney, who has lived on Cedar Creek for 35 years, wrote in a letter to the News Graphic: "What is to stop the creek from going dry in the future? How would Cedarburg merchants feel about losing a vibrant flowing river which empties into Adlai Horn Park?"

At the November meeting, resident Edward Cherwink asked the question on everyone's mind: "Is it going to leach out and cause more water problems elsewhere because everybody out there has water problems?"

The town has 134 property owners within 1,000 feet of the proposed pond site. That's 134 families wondering if their wells will run dry. That's 134 households potentially facing tens of thousands of dollars in drilling costs if the aquifer gets depleted. That's 134 neighbors being asked to sacrifice so that one wealthy family can have a private lake.

This isn't the Cedarburg way. This is something else entirely.

A Creek That's Already Been Through Hell

Here's what makes this even more painful: Cedar Creek has already suffered enough. From 1951 to 1982, Mercury Marine's Plant 2 discharged PCB-contaminated fluids into the creek. It became one of Wisconsin's most contaminated waterways -- a federal Superfund site. The EPA spent \$23 million cleaning up the sediment from Columbia Pond and Wire and Nail Pond, work that only finished in 2018.

The creek is healing. Fish are coming back. Kids play at Covered Bridge Park again. And now someone wants to fundamentally alter the creek's flow, draw millions of gallons out of it indefinitely, and hope for the best?

"The pumping of Cedar Creek will undoubtedly affect wildlife, aquatic, and plant life," Chesney wrote. "We could have another Lake Delton on our hands. The flooding of surrounding

properties and subdivisions could occur if a breach in the containment of the lake occurred or a catastrophic rain event happened."

Chesney asked another question that haunts this whole debate: "What happens when the Gauthiers move or retire? Do they plan to ski forever? Who will monitor the pond?"

Who indeed? Who pays when things go wrong? The Gauthiers? The town? The 134 neighbors whose wells might be compromised? The answer is nobody knows, because nobody with the power to demand answers is asking them.

Where Is Our Government When We Need Them?

Cedarburg residents have been trying to get the attention of state officials for weeks now. They've called. They've written. They've asked for help from the Wisconsin DNR, from the Governor's office, from anyone who might have the authority to require a comprehensive, independent environmental impact study before this project moves forward.

The silence has been deafening.

At a time when health insurance premiums are rising faster than wages, when SNAP benefits for families with children are shrinking, when working people in communities like Cedarburg are getting squeezed from every direction -- our state government can't even be bothered to respond to a small town facing the privatization of one of its most precious natural resources.

The DNR's role, as currently structured, is limited to verifying compliance with permit requirements. They're not empowered to demand comprehensive environmental impact assessments for private pond projects, no matter how massive. They review what applicants submit, but they don't independently investigate cumulative effects on small watersheds or neighboring properties.

That's not oversight. That's rubber-stamping.

Governor Tony Evers' office has been equally silent. No statement. No reassurance that the state cares about protecting small communities from the privatization of public water resources. Nothing.

This is unacceptable.

The Bigger Picture: Who Owns Wisconsin's Water?

What's happening in Cedarburg is about more than one pond. It's a test case. If the Gauthiers can take control of 35 million gallons of water from a small community creek and aquifer with minimal oversight and no independent environmental review, what's to stop the next wealthy landowner from doing the same thing? And the next? And the next?

Wisconsin's water doesn't belong to whoever can afford the best engineers and lawyers. It belongs to the people who live here, who depend on it, who have built their lives around it.

Cedarburg was built on shared water, shared prosperity, and mutual support. The town's motto might as well be: if you borrow a cup of sugar, you bring back two.

Michael and Stacy Gauthier are asking for 35 million gallons and offering nothing in return.

That's not neighboring. That's not the Wisconsin way. And it shouldn't be legal without comprehensive, independent review.

What Happens Next

The Town Plan Commission recommended approval of the necessary rezoning but did not endorse the pond application itself, sending it to the full Town Board for further review. The project still requires DNR permits, though the agency's review will be limited to regulatory compliance rather than comprehensive environmental and community impact.

Michael Gauthier told the town board the project would "preserve the real nature of the Town of Cedarburg, protect neighbors from further flooding, enhance the environment and create critical habitat for wildlife."

But as Chesney wrote: "Surely, the town board has a responsibility to those property owners rather than to the whims of one family wanting to water ski."

Cedarburg residents are calling on state officials to step up and do their jobs: require an independent, third-party environmental impact assessment paid for by the applicants but conducted by scientists with no financial stake in the outcome. Demand real answers about long-term effects on neighboring wells, creek flow, and aquatic life. And protect Wisconsin's water from privatization by wealthy individuals who see public resources as their personal amenities.

This is a moment when government is supposed to show up for small communities. This is when elected officials are supposed to say: "We hear you. We see what's at stake. And we're going to make sure this is done right."

So far, that hasn't happened.

Make Your Voice Heard

If you care about protecting Wisconsin's water resources from private appropriation, if you believe small communities deserve the same attention as wealthy developers, if you think Cedarburg's neighbors deserve answers -- contact your state officials today.

Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources

Phone: (888) 936-7463

Email: DNRAAdministrator@wisconsin.gov

Online: dnr.wisconsin.gov

Governor Tony Evers' Office

Phone: (608) 266-1212

Email: eversinfo@wisconsin.gov

Online: evers.wi.gov/Pages/contact.aspx

Find Your State Legislators

Wisconsin Legislature: legis.wisconsin.gov

Town of Cedarburg

Phone: (262) 377-4509

Website: www.townofcedarburgwi.gov

In the Cedarburg our grandparents built, if you borrowed a cup of sugar from your neighbor, you brought back two. That's the deal. That's the community.

It's time for the Gauthiers -- and our state government -- to remember what it means to be neighbors.

About Cedarburg

The Town of Cedarburg was founded in 1849 by German immigrants seeking religious freedom and economic opportunity. Built along Cedar Creek and known for its historic covered bridge -- Wisconsin's last -- the community has long been defined by preservation, mutual support, and shared stewardship of natural resources. The town's limestone buildings, grist mills, and woolen mills stand as testaments to a time when water was understood to be a common good, not a private luxury.

About Gauthier Biomedical

Founded in 2000 by Michael and Stacy Gauthier, Gauthier Biomedical manufactures precision orthopedic and spinal surgical instruments in Grafton, Wisconsin. The company is ISO 13485:2016 certified and FDA-registered, employing approximately 75 people and supplying instruments to major medical device companies including Medtronic, Zimmer, and Johnson & Johnson.