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Study Says Dane Co. Worst In State For Environmental Health

Study Focuses On Clean Water, Air

POSTED: 7:19 pm CDT July 7, 2008
 UPDATED: 7:37 pm CDT July 7, 2008



A study published recently in the Wisconsin Medical Journal said Dane County is dead last in the state when it comes to environmental health.

The authors of the UW Population Health Sciences study admitted that the factors used in the study could be improved. Still, they insist the study is valuable, including the part that states Dane County isn't as pristine as one might think.

On a summer day, Dane County seems postcard perfect with blue sky, lakes and lots of green space. So when it comes to clean air and clean water, one would think Dane County would be ranked high.

Michelle Tamez pondered that as she rode her bike and stopped to watch some baby geese near a wetland along Lake Mendota.

"Number one?" Tamez guessed.

She was wrong. Dane County is last on the list of all 72 counties involved in an environmental health study rating urban design, water quality and air quality.

"Really? Wow," Tamez said. "I am surprised."

She's not the only one. Jessica Athens is the lead author of the study.

"I was surprised, with me being a resident of Dane County, to see that we didn't rank particularly well," said Athens.

Nevertheless, Athens said the finding is accurate according to the public data that were used to create the county rankings.

Scenic, rural Bayfield County on Lake Superior was rated number one.

Dane County was rated the worst at 72, behind places like the city and county of Milwaukee.

Dane County scored well in the category that considers old housing stock and lead paint, but it ranked 64th poorest in air quality -- based on a set of four sets of data that include cancer risk and ozone. The county also ranked last in the state in water quality.

"I would hate to say we have extremely bad air and water quality but there are things we can do," said Athens. "That's really what we're interested in, sharing with the policy makers and the public."

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Athens and others admit the measures used could be improved, especially when it comes to water quality. That category considered only population exposure to potentially dangerous nitrate levels in public and private drinking water.

Since Dane County has a lot of unregulated private wells that might not be checked regularly for nitrates, it scored poorly.

"Dane County has the disadvantages of both the metro area and rural areas," Athens said. "We have a metro area in the middle of the county and then we have a lot of farmland so, that contributes to the challenges."

Athens said the air quality ranking was affected by regional pollution not emitted in Dane County. Still, Athens said it is information that can be used to help shape policies.

When other factors like mortality rates and behavior that affects health are figured in, Dane County ranks five out of the 72 counties.

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