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## State concerned about threats to water and sewage safety in Detroit and suburbs

By Ron Seigel

Special to Digital First Media

At a time of national attention and indignation about contaminated water in Flint, a state agency has expressed concern about possible threats to the safety of water and sewage in Detroit and its suburbs.

The Michigan Department of Environmental Quality sent a notice March 9 to both the Detroit Water and Sewage Department and the newly formed Great Lakes Water Authority (GLWA) serving the suburbs, that employee layoffs made in the Detroit Water System last October violated state environmental laws and a consent agreement made several years ago.

This violation notice added that they failed to provide "adequate documentation" for the state agency to determine whether after these layoffs there would be enough staff to "properly operate and maintain the Waste Water Treatment Plant and the Combined Sewage Overflow Facilities in the Detroit Water System."

The Detroit Water System supplies water and sewage to residents of Oakland, Macomb, Wayne, St. Clair, Lapeer, Genesee, Washtenaw and Macomb Counties.

The union representing employees working in the Detroit Water System, local 207 of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, warned that: "Action must be taken before another disaster is allowed to happen."

Susan Ryan, the union president, said: "We have been very fortunate so far that nothing has happened but we are concerned about what is happening in the waste water treatment plant. There are not enough staffers to assure water quality and keep sewage from our basements."

Ryan said that such tasks were left to nonprofessionals.

However, GLWA officials denied this. GLWA Director Susan McCormick and Chief Operating Officer Cheryl Porter said the only employees laid off were not those in evaluating water safety, but only those in maintenance and janitorial work.

The GLWA has disclosed that 137 employees were dismissed.

The union president showed a letter that management sent her last fall to inform her of which employees it planned to lay off in October. Among those

slated for layoffs were 14 sewer plant operators, two senior sewer plant operators, 14 sewer plant attendants, five water system control instrumental technicians, two water plant operators, five repair mechanics and two mechanical operators.

The State MDEQ stated these layoffs violated an administrative consent order between that state agency, and the Detroit Water and Sewage Department and agreed to by the newly formed GLWA, which took charge of suburban water at the start this year. MDEQ stated the agreement required at least 95 percent of the minimum staffing level of the MDEQ's approved staffing plan "on an average annual basis," but after the layoffs the staffing level went down to 85 percent.

The MDEQ violation notice stated these requirements could be revised by mutual agreement, but the employees were laid off one and a half months before water officials made the request to do so.

In its notice the MDEQ added it had still not received documents determining whether after such layoffs there would be enough staff to adequately treat the water and sewage. It also questioned whether the employees were adequately trained to do the job.

The notice stated that the consent order agreement required the employees to be trained for 2 percent of the hours they worked, but declared the water management records showed the workers received training for only two hours a month.

This training, the MDEQ notice said, "is integral to the development of a highly skilled flexible work force that is necessary for the operation" of water and sewage.

On behalf of GLWA, McCormick wrote back to the MDEQ on March 18 stating that the layoffs were made because of transition of operations from the Detroit Water and Sewage System to the GLWA, when GLWA took over its functions.

McCormick stated that many or most of the functions of the laid off employees will be replaced by new hires and internal transfers.

GLWA Counsel William Wolfson said because the consent agreement requiring GLWA to have 95 percent of the minimum staffing level specified, that this would be done on an "annual average basis."

In her reply to MDEQ, McCormick stated, "The requirement is not an instantaneous requirement, nor is it a rolling requirement. Any other interpretation would severely impede the flexibility GLMA must have to manage and administer effectively its operation.

"This, is how these provisions have always been interpreted and applied. The position asserted in the [MDEQ] violation notice [stating GLWA violated this requirement] is a complete reversal of the position."

One observer speculated if this did represent a change in MDEQ, it might have

been because of a growing public awareness about what happened in the Flint water crisis and a greater caution to prevent this from happening somewhere else.

"The determination of whether GLWA has achieved the 95 percent of the minimum level for the current period," McCormick declared, "will be made next October."

Amanda Abukhader, GLWA's official in charge of public information, was asked about the report MDEQ requested on whether in the meantime there was enough staff to maintain water and sewage safety. She said the report had been sent showing the staff was adequate. However, for a second time GLWA denied a request for official information.

She stated because the report involved discussions with the state MDEQ, it was considered premature to give the report to the press.

*– Ron Seigel's stories have appeared in The Christian Science Monitor, Our Sunday Visitor, Detroit News, Detroit Free Press, Detroit Legal News, Catholic Faith and Family, Jewish News, The Northwest Detroiter, and Berkley News. He worked as a staff writer for The Michigan Citizen, and from 1983 to 1992 was the editor of the newsletter for the Greater Detroit Interfaith Round Table of what was then The National Conference of Christians and Jews. He can be reached at [ronaldseigel@yahoo.com](mailto:ronaldseigel@yahoo.com)*