

Democratic state treasurer played key role in Flint water disaster

Shannon Jones
25 January 2016

Emails released by the office of Michigan Governor Rick Snyder further demonstrate the involvement of state and federal officials from both the Republican and Democratic parties in the poisoning of Flint residents and the subsequent cover-up.

Health professionals have warned that the tainted water has caused irreparable neurological damage to thousands of small children in the former center of General Motors manufacturing. It has also been linked to a spike in the respiratory ailment Legionnaires' disease, which has resulted in the deaths of least 10 residents.

While the Republican governor played a leading role in this crime, he was not alone. According to one email, former Democratic State Treasurer Andy Dillon made the "ultimate decision" to permit the city of Flint to leave the Detroit water system and begin drawing from the polluted Flint River. This proved to be a catastrophe for the city's residents, with the corrosive river water causing lead to leach from the city's antiquated pipes, poisoning the city's residents, including highly vulnerable children.

In a comment last week to the *Detroit News*, Dillon claimed that he originally opposed letting Flint switch its water source and "assumed it wouldn't save Flint money." Flint's then-emergency manager Ed Kurtz had calculated that the city would save money by switching its water source to the Karegnondi Water Authority (KWA), then under construction, in the meantime using the Flint River as a water source.

"After briefing, I was satisfied there was no construction risk to Flint and learned after input from (the state Department of Environmental Quality) that KWA water would in fact be cheaper for Flint residents," Dillon wrote in an email to the *News*.

Dillon claimed that he thought the city would sign a

short-term contract with Detroit to continue supplying water until a new pipeline from Flint to Lake Huron was completed during the next 18 months. "I assumed they would work something out with Detroit," Dillon said. "They could have just stayed with" the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD) until the pipeline was in service.

While denying responsibility, as treasury secretary Dillon was charged with supervising Flint's emergency manager and had to sign off on all contracts of more than \$50,000. This means he would have had to approve Kurtz's April 2013 decision to reject the DWSD offer and end Flint's half-century practice of buying water from Detroit. It also suggests he approved the implementation of the plan by newly appointed EM Darnell Earley in April 2014, which included the switch to the Flint River.

"I don't recall that decision coming to me; it may have occurred after I left Treasury," Dillon, who stepped down as treasurer in October 2013, claimed in a recent comment to the *Detroit News*. However, Snyder's former chief of staff, Dennis Muchmore, told the *News*, "I think the Flint River was always part of the KWA plan as far as I know, but that wasn't what Dillon was signing off on."

In a September 25, 2015 email, Muchmore told Snyder that Flint's water issue "continues to be a challenging topic" and said the switch to use the city's river water has "spurred most of the controversy and contention." Facing a firestorm of opposition, the state officials were most concerned about concealing their role, not addressing the public health disaster. The email accused "some in Flint" for trying to "shift responsibility to the state," but Muchmore wrote, "I can't figure out why the state is responsible except that Dillon did make the ultimate decision so we're not able

to avoid the subject.”

Before Snyder selected him for secretary of treasury in 2011, Dillon was a leading figure in the state Democratic Party and the speaker of the Michigan House of Representatives. A former investment banker, he served as president of Detroit Steel (formerly McLouth Steel) and vice president of GE Capital’s Commercial Financial Group. He was also a managing director of private equity firm Wynnchurch Capital Partners, a company notorious for buying up struggling businesses, imposing massive job cuts and pay cuts on workers, and then selling the stripped-down companies for a profit.

With close connections to various “turnaround firms,” Dillon played a key role in the conspiracy orchestrated by the Snyder administration, banks and wealthy bondholders to throw Detroit into bankruptcy. This included the installation of Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr, who threw the city into bankruptcy on July 18, 2013. The bankruptcy was used to obtain an unprecedented federal court ruling stripping Detroit retirees of their constitutional protection against pension cuts and to slash city worker health benefits and sell off public assets.

As a result of the restructuring, Detroit’s Department of Water and Sewerage sharply increased rates both for customers and other municipalities in order to pay off the big bondholders that controlled the city and water department’s debt. This resulted in a wave of water shutoffs for tens of thousands of households behind on their exorbitant bills, and a sharp increase in the price of water pumped from Detroit to Flint. At the time, US bankruptcy judge Steven Rhodes declared that city residents had no “fundamental right” to water service.

Dillon was not the only Democratic politician involved in the poisoning of Flint residents. Both the mayor of Flint and members of the City Council were Democrats. They gave their political support to the decision to switch to Flint River water. They joined with state officials in stonewalling the bitter complaints of city residents over discolored, foul-tasting water.

The federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), staffed by Obama administration appointees, also played a key role in the cover-up of lead poisoning.

As early as June 2015 a lower ranking EPA official, Miguel del Toral, warned superiors of high levels of lead in Flint’s drinking water. He noted that in one

home that was tested there were 13,200 parts per billion (ppb) of lead in the water. The federal level that triggers action by the EPA is 15 ppb.

Del Toral warned EPA officials that the city of Flint lacked corrosion control measures that would prevent the leaching of lead into the city’s water system. The EPA’s top administrator in Michigan, Susan Hedman, who resigned last week, refused to either act on del Toral’s findings or make them public. Instead of ringing the alarm bell, Hedman claims that she “quietly fought” the state’s Department of Environmental Quality for months behind the scenes over the corrosion question.

As for the EPA’s top official, Gina McCarthy, she defended the agency’s role, claiming the EPA “did its job.” Despite this defense of the agency’s criminal actions in abetting the poisoning of Flint’s population, Obama has not sought McCarthy’s resignation or accepted any responsibility for the crisis. Instead he and other Democrats, including Hillary Clinton, have attempted to shift all blame onto the shoulders of the Republican governor.

The response of the Obama administration to the crisis illustrates the hostility and indifference of all sections of the ruling elite to the dire conditions facing workers in Flint and around the world. In the face of the poisoning of tens of thousands of children and adults that has resulted in brain and genetic damage that will span generations, the White House has only offered federal aid of \$80 million, less than half the cost on just one F-35 fighter jet. The cost of repairing Flint’s water system alone is estimated at as much as \$1.5 billion.



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